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The aesthetics and politics of indeterminancy in experimental video

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The Aesthetics and Politics of Indeterminacy
in Experimental Video

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ABSTRACT

The Aesthetics and Politics of Indeterminacy
in Experimental Video, 1965-1985

Catherine Robertson

The primary concern of the dissertation is a
clarification of the aesthetic and political significance of
indeterminacy in experimental video made during the late
sixties and seventies. The term "indeterminacy" here refers
to a postmodern aesthetic and rhetorical strategy which
deliberately relinquishes control over the materiality of
the text. I argue that this strategy takes on a radically
new and complex significance when transposed to the medium
of video. Understanding the significance of that
transposition has been blocked and obscured, primarily, by
reductive readings of the Frankfurt school's undeveloped
theories of mass culture, and by an ultimately paradoxical
emphasis on the potentially subversive "polysemy" of the
televisual text instead of the experimental video text.

The introductory chapter provides a brief history of
video art's emergence out of opposition to the dominance of
commercial television, and introduces the postmodern
aesthetics of intermedia, blurred genres, dissolution of the
boundaries between "art" and the "everyday," and principles
of chance and indeterminacy, which would determine the

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aesthetics of a majority of the video art of the sixties and seventies. Chapter two critiques the premises which have led neo-Marxist postmodernists such as John Fiske and Fredric Jameson to overlook or misread the political significance of video art, and calls for a performative understanding of the performative in video. Chapter three discusses theories of language and image which attempt to get at the meaning of the "indeterminate" image (Marjorie Perloff, Henry Sayre), the "nomadism" of postmodern thought (Deleuze) and a dialectical or dialogical mode of seeing in an age of mass culture (Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes). Chapter four attempts to enact the kind of dialectical seeing called for by Barthes, Bakhtin, and Benjamin in detailed descriptive readings of the work of experimental video artists which engages the performative, the indeterminate, and the processual in video art as it functions both poetically and rhetorically to expand the language of the televisual. Chapter five is a short conclusion, suggesting directions for further research on the connection between performative seeing and performance theory.

PREFACE

I wish to thank the members of my committee --
Professors Dwight Conquergood, Paul Edwards, and Carol
Simpson Stern, for their encouragement.

I also thank my parents, Berit and Jim Robertson, for
their faith, support, and wisdom. I owe them an unspeakable
debt.

I dedicate this to Adam.

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I. Introduction

Television had already become the paradigmatic form of postmodern culture when "experimental video," or "video art," became physically possible (Sony began selling its portapaks to consumers for the first time in 1965). As a result, artists and activists who seized the first opportunity to say something in video outside of the television industry, to critique it or to break new ground in video's rhetorical and aesthetic potential, were caught in a paradoxical position: according to the dominant Marxist narratives of postmodernism which have been extrapolated from the Frankfurt School's denunciation of popular culture, it was already too late to intervene in the "culture industry" through artistic praxis.[1] As Patrick Brantlinger points out, all of the Frankfurt School intellects were convinced that "television, 'even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be antitotalitarian,' tends toward fascism."[2]

As we will see, a technological determinism and/or utopianism of the late 1960s and 1970s displaced the Frankfurt school's influence, and the development of postmodernism has progressively excluded the Frankfurt school from the debate on mass culture. Peter Hohendahl

describes the new positioning of the Frankfurt School as
part of the "old" paradigm. Jim Collins, for instance, has
rejected Horkheimer's and Adorno's Dialectic of
Enlightenment as out-moded and ill-suited for the analysis
of contemporary mass culture,[3] and Adorno in general has
been positioned as a cultural elitist, one whose
prescriptives for the necessary "autonomy" of art from the
social sphere have been enlisted by cultural conservatives
and those who wish to position popular art as derivative or
inferior. The new paradigm dismantles the notion that the
work of art or writing is self-contained, dissolves the
barriers between "high" and "low" culture, and demotes the
power figures of modernism -- the individual, the artist-
hero, the author, the work of art. It has no use for
Adorno's or any other prescriptions for the "true work of
art."

This "new paradigm," loosely identifiable as a version
of the increasingly contested postmodernism, has liberated
analysis of mass culture by breaking with the modernist
tradition and with the Frankfurt school. But the paradigm
of postmodernism is not a stable concept -- it is perhaps
even already "outmoded," as Hal Foster (career definer of
postmodernism) argued in a recent issue of October[4]. It is
unclear even to those who use the term whether it adequately
describes a state culture is in, a political/economic/

cultural matrix which is the result of late capitalism, a
set of beliefs, a metadiscourse on modernism, or a genuinely
new paradigm whose terms will be necessary for understanding
the future world. What is commonly agreed is that the
beliefs and assumptions that undergirded modernist concepts
of art, and the concepts of meaning, artist, author, and
work of art are now subjected to radical doubt. What is
commonly doubted is whether and to what extent those
concepts will vanish, return or simply be refashioned. The
discourse on postmodernism was derailed, Foster argues, by
Jameson's and Lyotard's attempts to provide master
narratives of it -- models which did not recognize "the
different speeds as well as the mixed spaces of postmodern
society,... the deferred action as well as the incessant
expansion of capitalist culture."[5] Postmodernism is, he
argues, "always in parallax."[6]

The instability of the term "postmodernism" is part of
this inquiry. Since my ultimate concern in this thesis is
with the aesthetic of indeterminacy, which I see as
increasingly pervasive in television and video culture, a
number of trends in postmodernist thinking are necessary to
my discussion. Thus I argue at the outset that good
postmodernist thinking emphasizes not the end of modernism
for better or worse, but rather the beginning of a new and
complex awareness of the historicity and the instability of

meaning, identity, truth, and authority. Postmodernists who have woven master narratives defining postmodernism, such as Fredric Jameson, are targets of my argument. I agree with Hal Foster that as such, "postmodernism" is always in flux, and I agree with Marjorie Perloff that the value of postmodernism has been, since the 60s, its openness rather than its tangibility.

Postmodern cultural theory which has treated video as cultural text has suffered from the very rigidity Foster describes. While sociological and semiotic approaches to television have become increasingly penetrating, the mass media remain, in most cultural theory, a vast undifferentiated totality, a "total flow," according to Raymond Williams which, though increasingly difficult to characterize, is impossible to get outside of (Baudrillard and Jameson). Even the notion of television's uncontrollability or "polysemy" has contributed to this closure -- as Umberto Eco has said, the entirely open and unbounded is, paradoxically, closed. Thus the concept of a valid artistic praxis in the medium of mass culture continues to be construed as impossible. Or, as Judith Barry has put it: "In the dismantling of modernism and its turn to strategies and textual systems, the ability to posit 'constructions' that embody specific programs seems to be temporarily paralyzed."[7]

This sense of the impossibility of taking on the
vastness of the popular and the mass media is not merely
imposed on experimental video by cultural theorists and
critics. It is one of the characteristics of video art
that, like pop art, it has depended for its conceptual
tension on the logical incommensurability of critique of
mass culture and participation in mass culture. Or, to make
a comparison whose relevance will hopefully become clear
later in this study, video artists believed, like Walter
Benjamin, that "dialectical images" of popular culture were
in fact a valid form of critique. Regardless of the
philosophical viability of this belief (over which Adorno,
among others, differed from Benjamin) the faith it expresses
that images can be double-voiced, dialectical, and
contradictory, generated extremely rich work which has
explored perception itself and its relationship to thinking,
rather than merely its relationship to language.

But the significance of this work has been subsumed by
the technological determinism of the discourse which
supported it.[8] Outside the world of video art itself,
which generates theories often written by the artists
themselves or by critics sympathetic with them,[9] criticism
and analysis of such work tends toward the taxonomic and the
thematic, describing it in broad strokes rather than in
detailed readings and construing its significance in terms

of the televisual conventions and rhetorical practices it
subverts rather than the new modes of seeing or expression
it reveals. Thus, despite the effort of the independent
video maker to articulate something personal (or individual)
in the medium of the mass (or the typical), a praxis Marxist
postmodern theory continually calls for, video art is given
very little thought in contemporary cultural discourse.
Even those who engage in video analysis seem constantly to
base their readings on an oversimplified notion of its mere
resistance to television.

Postmodern cultural studies, largely Marxist in this
country, have thus dismissed independent video along with
modernism, or shied away from any discussion of video's
potential. John Fiske has led contemporary media criticism
away from the project of identifying the possibility of
active "resistance" to the commercial media by artists, and
has replaced the concept of action with a concept of
resistive viewing, a move which credits the active
imagination and increasingly sophisticated "videocy"[10] of
the audience. In its various forms and concepts, this
concept of resistant reading, which media and communications
theory guarantee is made possible by the inherent "semiotic
democracy" of the televisual, has grown out of an awareness
of the intrinsic polysemy of filmic and televisual images.
But that polysemy has been conflated, in media theory, with

the semantic openness television maintains in order to appeal to the broadest number of viewers. As a result, the fragmented and polysemic videotext has remained, in the discourses of Marxist, media and some performance theory, mere metaphor for postmodernism instead of text to be productively analyzed.

Despite the now-dated social and aesthetic theory in which the Frankfurt school's cultural criticism was based, the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno is still a model of a valid dialectical synthesis of careful attention to texts with careful attention to the material and social conditions they express. The successors of that method, especially cultural studies, have rejected the aesthetic texts in which Adorno in particular placed his faith in "negation," but as Peter Hohendahl suggests, the critical edge of the Frankfurt School's cultural theory need not be circumscribed by its modernism.[11]

Again, the purpose of this study is to identify and describe the aesthetic and political function of televisual "indeterminacy," thrown into relief, and uniquely clarified, by the efforts of video artists to engage and orchestrate the semantic complexities of the televisual text. A clearer concept of the political valence and social significance of experimental video, together with a method of 'reading' the videos themselves is offered as a contribution to a pedagogy

and a critical practice that seeks an understanding of the complexity of the televisual image, both within and outside of the television industry, in terms of its social context and rhetorical and aesthetic precedents.

The scope of this study has been determined by an early hypothesis that the aesthetics of video, when clarified by a study of "video art," have serious implications for the aesthetics and the politics of language, philosophy, literature, and, connected to all of them, performance. To date there is an abundance of interdisciplinary theory (e.g., poststructuralist theory, film theory, cultural studies, literary theory, and versions of what we may loosely group as Marxist aesthetic theory) on the political, psychological, cultural, and aesthetic effects of media image. This work has broken new ground on a range of topics: the subject position ("screen theory"), the distinction between "producers" and "audience," the signifying and narrative practices of film (Metz, Heath, Bordwell), absence and presence in speech and writing (Barthes, Derrida), the performance as "text," the resurgence of orality in an age of literacy (Ong, McLuhan), the "simulacrum" (Baudrillard), and the movement-image (Deleuze). However, none of the work has examined video art itself, its potential as a critical praxis, or its role in the cultural process. Instead, theory has tended to

position itself as a metadiscourse over an undifferentiated entity whose role in culture remains static. So, for critical energy, chapter 4 will draw on the work of those who I think articulate most fully the dialectical potential of mass cultural media: Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes.

The rest of this chapter situates the aesthetics and politics of experimental video in the unsettled environment in which it emerged -- the 1960s, a period torn by a technological utopianism and a cultural dystopianism. Experimental video makers, ideally unified in that first "utopian moment" of video's birth, diverged into two camps for political and economic reasons[12] -- this split has since become a foundational one between the "aesthetes" and the "activists."[13] The aesthetic and political ideologies driving the two camps were quite different -- the performative, interdisciplinary modes of artistic praxis inspired by John Cage and others on one "side," and Marxist aesthetic theory (predominantly the Frankfurt school) on the other "side." Despite their theoretical differences, however, the two "sides" manifested themselves in aesthetically similar terms. Both have used the fragment and an aesthetic of "indeterminacy," in ways which are suggestive for language theory. But both, I will argue, are ulimately best understood through theories that place the

indeterminacy and dialectical character of the image and of perception on center stage.

1. Background: Experimental Video

A history of the politics of video aesthetics could begin in any number of places. It could begin with the first public television broadcast in London in 1936 and the "relative artlessness" of television's early projection styles.[14] Or, because video is a camera art, its conventions and interventions could belong to the larger history which includes photography and film.[15] Or, because of its paradigmatic status within the contemporary divide between modernism and postmodernism,[16] video's history could be incorporated into a history of the transition from modernism to postmodernism in art.[17] Or we could incorporate video art into literature, finding in the history of American literature the trends, story structures, jokes, and themes which have preceded many of the television genres we see today on television, or noting the shifts in literary practice as it is affected by the media.[18]

But video has constructed its own history from the beginning, very self-consciously.[19] The conventional story is that video art dates from Sony's distribution of the first "portapaks," Sony consumer-grade portable video

recorders, to the commercial market in 1965. Nam June Paik, the Korean "Fluxus" artist, officially became the first "video artist" when he bought one of the first available Portapaks, videotaped the procession of Pope Paul VI into Manhattan's Saint Patrick's Cathedral from the cab on his way home, and showed it the same night, unedited, at the Cafe à Go Go in New York.

Histories of this period such as Martha Rosler's have questioned the conventional mythological structure in this story,[20] and in fact Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik and others had already incorporated the television set into art and "electronic music" installations prior to 1965. Nevertheless, this particular event is significant in several ways. It marked the liberation of video from television.[21] Paik was the first "civilian" to use a medium that had been previously monopolized by the television industry, at a time when intervention in the media had particular resonance for both the cultural avant-garde and the political left. Paik's incorporation of the mass media into an avant-garde art world often accused of being apolitical (Pop especially so) lent a new and broader credence to the aesthetics of the fragment, of the immediate, and of the recorded, which as the next section shows, artists in the 1960s were already exploring. Thus Paik's first videotape achieved that rare "alliance of

political and artistic radicalism" which, Poggioli argues, has been the implicit or the ideal meaning of the "avant-garde" since the term became common during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 in France, and again between 1870-1880.[22]

The magnitude of this moment is dependent entirely on the immediate cultural context in which it emerged. In the 1960s, the growing recognition that television was the instrument of a political and cultural hegemony made the medium itself the focal point for many groups, unified, on different levels of concern, by a common priority of elucidating television's nature and its effect on the viewer, although divided by their opinion of television's place in culture. While sociologists and market researchers discussed the statistics of American television viewing habits and the kind of reality that was being imparted to a mass audience, avant-garde artists and left-wing political activists set about re-making TV themselves, by taking video into their own hands.

Thus Paik's tape both constituted the first instance of an intervention of the ordinary citizen in media, and it signified that intervention through its style or its formal properties: it was shot cheaply and artlessly, with a hand-held camera, and was then shown as is, raw and unedited. This kind of casual production style became a hallmark of experimental video. For about a decade after Paik's first

piece, independent video continued to use that kind of raw, cheap, unedited, black and white or color footage, which sharply distinguished it from television in terms of style.

The rawness of Paik's first tape was also a kind of rebirth, a renaissance for television technology, returning the medium to the simplicity and "artlessness" of the first television broadcasts.[23] The difference in the new, reconstructed translucency of experimental video was the deliberateness of its "return to innocence," the Romanticism in its search for the roots, or the radical, of seeing. Renato Poggioli has described this ideologically loaded simple seeing, this "naturalism" as the only aesthetic strategy which appeals both to the "cultural" and the "political" avant-gardes.[24] And indeed Paik's first video, in its appeal to both the political and artistic left, became part of the history of utopian and romantic art movements which return to an emphasis on the artist's particular vision, expressed in a form or medium accessible to the people and against the prevailing aesthetic conventions. We will see, in the next section, that this tendency to believe, consciously or unconsciously, in the romantic precept that "the artist is at least as much of a 'seer' as a 'maker,' [that] the artist recognizes the aesthetic in the world, and frames it,"[25] was preserved even as it was transformed in postmodern art praxis,

particularly in experimental video.

There is one more aspect of this first tape's instant
identity as "art" which has significance for the rest of our
discussion. The meaning of the tape had more to do with
Paik's presence at the scene of the event than anything else
-- first, it carried the trace of his bodily position as an
individual subject at a public event, and second, it
instantly magnified and thus made symbolic the subjective
experience of the average individual. The implication was
an extension of Benjamin's prediction that the newspaper
would turn everyone into a potential author and Warhol's
prediction that everyone would have 15 minutes of fame: that
the use of the video camera turned the subject's position,
and subjective perception, into a public fact or truth.
Thus any independent video maker could make the personal
political by working with video and, by taking up the very
public or collective language of the media, would naturally
achieve that Romantic identity of subjectivity and
objectivity, of style and theme, the Kantian balance between
personal and social meaning. The brief consensus among
video artists on the broad significance of this kind of
style promised a kind of utopia for video art. The period
in the late 1960s and early 1970s during which this ideal
persisted, a period Martha Rosler dubbed the "utopian
moment" of experimental video,[26] was a unique and short-

lived moment of harmony between the concerns and the aesthetic strategies of both the artistic and the socio-political avant-garde.

The ultimate source of that harmony and also of the semantic clarity of early video art depended on the fact of television, which was always, in some way, its subject or its catalyst. Paik's piece would not have nearly the significance it had, or half the attention, without television to differentiate itself from. The television industry had defined the formal and technical properties of the video medium as well as the representational conventions which video art would define itself ironically against.[27] That heritage of video art placed video artists in a liminal position between high art and mass culture, a galvanizing, but "fundamentally paradoxical" and "unavoidably compromised" position, as Linda Hutcheon has put it.

This dilemma was energizing for video artists in the 1960s and 1970s, after Pop's public demonstration of powerlessness before the media.[28] Formally, experimental video's attempt to use and transform the language of television, in order to reclaim it from the dominance of commercial television, generated an enormous variety of creative uses of the medium, aesthetically and rhetorically. In the process of developing "alternative television," video artists explored previously unexplored dynamics of the video

image, of the television screen, and the relationship
between the viewer, the camera, the television, and the
public. In particular they sought to understand the way we
perceive video images -- to determine the symbolic or
aesthetic significance of its coarse, degenerated, poster-
like, less detailed quality -- and they sought to reactivate
the communicative, dialogic properties of video -- its
capacities for interactivity and instantaneous transmission
-- in order to reinscribe in the video image the dynamics of
individual expression.

As long as television was the clear model or target of
these experiments, its conventions provided a code which
ordered video artists' open-ended play with the medium, and
clarified an otherwise subtle ideological and operative
split which developed between those more interested in the
aesthetics and poetics of video, and those more interested
in the politics of access, information, and the voice of the
marginal. That split widened in the 1970s -- as the
pressure to show, distribute, and get funding for their work
mounted, those differences became more palpable and
institutional.[29] In particular, sociopolitically motivated
video makers objected to the tendency of the "aesthetic"
camp to cater to museums in the development of their work,
to seek work in institution- and television-sponsored video
labs, and to develop new methods of image processing.

In retrospect, it is clear that both "sides" had important features in common. Each side carried with them the (romantic) ideal of an identity between the personal and the political. Both sides saw the creative or the conscientious use of the media as the way to a kind of liberation -- for the aesthetes it was a "sensory" liberation, a "freedom from," to borrow Wayne Booth's phrase,[30] and for the other, politically motivated group it was a political liberation, a new kind of access to public space for the marginalized, a "freedom to." In fact, each "camp" (and I think it a useful metaphor because it connotes the simple binary structure of the debate which was more of a turf struggle than a real philosophical difference) used aesthetic strategies which look, to the uninitiated, fairly similar, especially in the early decades. Most of them were shot in black and white, on cheap, low-grade stock, had a homespun look, and tended to use ambient sound and spare editing. Those characteristics themselves, signifying Not-Television, constituted an emphasis on aesthetic difference as critical statement regardless of the content of the videotape.

Twenty years later, as broadcast television has become increasingly decentralized by video recording and playback technology and by cable and public access television, the oppositional relationship of what has now come to be known

less problematically as "video art" to broadcast television
has lost its force, and the work of its negation has lost
its clarity. Thus its "oppositional" status is less clear
and the work of its interpretation is more complex. At the
same time, the history of video art's efforts to critique,
satirize, or escape the conventions of television, and its
simultaneous and vexed absorption into corporate
institutions supporting television, lends a particular
political valence to the postmodern artistic strategy video
does best: the engagement or the framing of the fragment,
the "strip of behavior" in everyday life, the indeterminate,
the kind of "meaning" which is "on the move," the moment of
"semiosis" or simply of "intensity" which sticks to no
system or ideology, which is evocative but not delimiting.

This aspect of the televisual has been described in a
way that leaves the televisual fairly static. Such
descriptions tend to use television as a paradigm for, or an
equivalent of, postmodern culture.[31] As we will see in
chapter two, Fredric Jameson sees television and video as
the cultural dominant of the logic of postmodernism, and
John Fiske accepts and describes the commercially determined
polysemy of television as incontrovertible. Raymond
Williams, in his book on television, grants that in
television "there are discernible, important, and varying
proportions of significant and trivial work," but ultimately

these critical discriminations "pale before the generality
of the habit itself [of watching television]."[32] Even more
adventurous contemporary theorists, such as Avital Ronnell,
tend to remain wide-eyed and apocalyptic about television:

> TV is not so much the beginning of something new,
> but is instead the residue of an unassimilable
> history. Television is linked crucially to the
> enigma of survival. It inhabits the contiguous
> neighborhoods of broken experience and rerouted
> memory.[33]

Even the discourse of video criticism, like contemporary art
and film criticism, tends to specify a playing field rather
than a meaning or argument. The thematic categories imposed
on video at various times by anthologies, distributors'
catalogues, retrospectives, and histories of experimental
video[34] are an attempt at codification, a reduction of
video art per se to a structural text.

What a close examination of video art's use of the
polysemic television image permits us to detect is the
difference between an open-ended, dialectical indeterminacy
and the closed, autotelic or "meaningless" indeterminacy
Jameson has ascribed to television. In the next two
sections we will describe the main aesthetic trends which
influenced the aesthetics and politics of many video artists
of the 1960s and 1970s -- the performative postmodern art

movements influenced mainly by John Cage, such as the Happenings and Fluxus, and Pop Art. A variety of artists with a variety of agendas began employing indeterminacy, with increasing aesthetic and political complexity, in their work in the 1950s and 1960s. The purpose of the following history is thus to give a social and theoretical context to the use of indeterminacy in experimental video.

2. Intermedia[35] and the Art of the Everyday

Early video art was directly influenced by the experimentation of artists, dancers, performers, musicians, and writers with new media and new definitions of the artistic process in the 1960s. Out of a disillusionment with formalist modernism, including abstract expressionism and minimalism, came an increasingly inclusive, and inconclusive, concept of the aesthetic which expanded on Dada and Surrealism's interest in "the sublation of art and life," as Peter Bürger has described the renunciation of autonomous aesthetic production and abandonment of the commodified art object which began with modernism.[36] The pursuit, preceded by Duchamp, Appolinaire, and Arp among others, of a "pervasive openness to new impressions" by relinquishment of control of their work to "external arbitrary forms"[37] such as the principles of chance and

indeterminacy, was transformed in the decades between 1960-
1980, as the flight from the institutionalization of
aesthetic production and social space became more
complicated. From the minimalist emphasis on the
materiality of art (a quality which Michael Fried famously
denounced as "theatrical,"[38] a designation whose
significance for postmodernism should become clearer
throughout this study) artists became fascinated with the
relationship between the material and the immaterial
elements of the art object or process, and with the use of
time, space, language, and performance as unassimilable
materials of composition. These concerns in turn led many
artists to begin working in the media of mass culture, for a
variety of political and aesthetic reasons.

The conceptual and multimedia art practice which
developed in the 1960s and 1970s might be said to be a
revised avant-gardeism, perhaps a postmodern avant-garde,
which was seeking to preserve the freedom and social
autonomy of art from the commercial world. This generation
had learned, however, from the history of modern art, that
any object or "important event" would end up being coopted,
adding to the strength and flexibility of the (inherently
suspect) institutions of art. So in the 1960s and 1970s
artists of all media lost their trust in the object and put
their new faith in the ephemeral, producing "unassimilable"

art forms which aimed at removing the artistic process from the economy of commodification. To use a phrase of Deleuze's which we will discuss later in our chapter on the aesthetic of indeterminacy, art entered into a phase of "nomadism," characterized by the exteriorization of the artistic method begun by Dada. Artists from the 1950s through the 1970s worked on movement over stasis, event over object, "'concerts' of everyday living," as Fluxus composer and poet Dick Higgins put it,[39] which engaged the commonplace instead of the rare. This movement, perhaps better called a faith, sought to transform the mundane through the liberation of the senses, outside of the limitations of work, value, price, space, or the institutions of art.

Though inspired by Dada and Surrealism, the contemporary, collaborative, and performative work of the 1960s grew out of, or was influenced indirectly by, two legendary collaborative moments presided over by John Cage: the summer school sessions at Black Mountain College, and the classes in music composition Cage taught in the late 1950s and early 1960s at the New School for Social Research in New York. At Black Mountain college Cage -- along with Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg, a trio David Shapiro has called the "supremely generative nexus of our epoch" -- developed an aesthetics of collaboration, of

intermedia, and of performance which influenced a whole generation of artists. And later, at the New School, a variety of students (artists, poets, musicians, performers) were encouraged by Cage's lectures on music composition to develop their own collaborative, experimental, intermedia performance events. Cage's ideas exerted a philosophical force which has extended beyond the world of music, performance, and art -- his influence may even, as Gregory Ulmer suggests, represent an "epistemic shift" in cognition and invention.[40]

The "epistemic shift" identified with Cage did not, of course, originate with him, and it is ironic that Cage, whose proto-postmodern aesthetics stressed the nonhierarchical and the collaborative, should have gained the status of a modern artist-hero. It is particularly ironic because his own heroes, Marshall McLuhan, Norman Brown, Buckminster Fuller, and Marcel Duchamp, tended away from the kind of artistic and intellectual egoism modernism had bred.

Cage's modes of composition were in fact derived from a pastiche of influences, and the sounds he considered music and his methods of composing those sounds came from antithetical sources. His style of notation for conventionally "non-musical" sounds came from ancient oriental models of notation which, he thought, were based on

the principles of chance. But his fascination for the noises of the modern world, and his enthusiasm for what he called a "renaissance" in music, he attributed to Luigi Russolo's manifesto The Art of Noises, written in 1913, which was in turn addressed to Balilla Pratella and the noises of war and of the machine used in Marinetti's Futurist theatre.[41]

Cage's excavation and synthesis of the precedents for his performative work were marked by a spirit distinctly different from the mechanization of the performer advocated by Russolo and by Marinetti. If his Futurist predecessors wanted to march fully, bodily, conceptually, and aggressively in step with the machine age, Cage wanted to stop and listen to it -- a difference in attitude which marks a shift in the political edge of the avant-garde. Cage was an experimenter and a player, not a critical theorist.

Thus in the performative work of John Cage and his collaborators, the principles of chance and indeterminacy, which Dada and Surrealist artists among others had introduced as the methods of liberating the senses from an increasingly rational and technical society, were engaged with a slightly different spirit and emphasis, one which taught attention to, rather than rejection of, the experiences and the technologies of the modern world. In

adopting chance procedures into his musical composition and poetry, Cage constructed a kind of indeterminacy[42] which was oriented not towards disorientation or shock, but towards experience. Cage's concerts of silence, for instance, were not meant to negate music but rather to redirect the audience's attention to the "music" of the world around them and to provoke less a critical consciousness than a heightened aesthetic sensibility, a "quietistic attention to the vernacular of everyday life," as Martha Rosler has described it.[43] This quietism, Rosler adds, may have been apolitical -- for all its (otherwise) "open" character, she rightly notes that it "made a radical closure when it came to divining the causes of what entered the perceptual field."[44]

Nevertheless, Cage's work and the work it inspired was a sincere and lifelong attempt to do what Marcel Duchamp had begun -- both to desublimate art and aestheticize life practice. His philosophy was not new or unique,[45] but Cage gathered around him a powerful combination of forces which had been gathering in the arts, in the academy, and on the Left as the technology of capitalism became more sophisticated and the prominence of high modernism waned. Cage was only the most visible and vocal of the artists turning to the vernacular movements, sights, and sounds of everyday life as new material for art. Merce Cunningham and

later Yvonne Rainer and the Judson School dancers were, at
the same time, turning away from the dramatic and narrative
organization of Martha Graham's dances toward the use of
vernacular movement -- walking, standing, leaping. And in
the art world Robert Rauschenberg's very different energy,
his "prancing, fecund, and careless talent" as Robert Hughes
has described it, was opening up the definition of art,
showing that, in Hughes' words:

> ...a work of art can exist for any length of time,
> in any material (from a stuffed goat to a live
> human body), anywhere (on a stage, in front of a
> TV camera, underwater, on the surface of the moon,
> or in a sealed envelope), for any purpose (turn-
> on, contemplation, amusement, invocation, threat)
> and any destination it chooses, from the museum to
> the trashcan.[46]

Perhaps another part of the reason Cage had such a
broad influence is that his quietistic approach to the chaos
of the sights and sounds of the twentieth century
constituted a positive philosophy of perception rather than
a negative philosophy, which had particular resonance for an
art culture seeking faith as modernism waned. Cage is often
described as a "spiritual" symbol of the conceptual
movement.[47] No description or analysis of John Cage goes
without a description of his perception of the whole world

as a work of art.[48] In an oft-quoted conceptual statement
titled "Experimental Music," Cage wrote

> And what is the purpose of writing music? One is,
> of course, not dealing with purpose but dealing
> with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of
> paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a
> purposeless play. This play, however, is an
> affirmation of life -- not an attempt to bring
> order out of chaos... but simply a way of waking
> up to the life we're living, which is so excellent
> once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of
> its way and lets it act of its own accord.[49]

For Cage, the operations of chance were not a means of
revolt against other formal principles, but a means of
revealing or emphasizing the world. Cage's purposeful
purposelessness was an antidote at a time when modern art,
in crisis, had come to the position of what Derrida called a
negative atheology: "Complicitous, it still repeats the
absence of a center when it would be, already, better to
affirm free play."[50] And, as Michel Benamou argues
following Derrida, it is the seriousness of free play which
postmodernism must acknowledge. In this context, Cage's
play was affirmative, archeological.

Cage's combination of mysticism and interest in the
sensual as a zone of freedom brought together two vital

forces of art in the new and ancient mode of the performative. Two main modes of performance art developed simultaneously from his influence -- one called "Happenings" and the other called "Fluxus events." It would be inaccurate to distinguish them as opposed camps in performance art, since the term "Happenings" more accurately labels a fertile period of experimentation out of which the more specific agendas and concerns of Fluxus emerged and from which it attempted to differentiate itself. But Fluxus, however disparate a group, would represent the strain of avant-garde explorations between media which would lead most directly to the use of video. Nam June Paik was (and still is) associated with Fluxus.

The happenings of the late 1950s and early 1960s were inspired by Cage's reports of the collaborative Black Mountain college event, and students in Cage's classes at the New School (Allan Kaprow, Jackson MacLow, George Brecht, Al Hansen and Dick Higgins) soon began making their own events. Allan Kaprow coined the term "happening," which he defined as an event, "something spontaneous, something that just happens to happen," that could be performed only once, though the performance for which he coined the word, his first public "live art" event, "18 Happenings in 6 Parts" (performed at the Reuben Gallery in New York in 1959), was carefully scripted and rehearsed for two weeks.[51] Richard

Kostelantz, who prefers to designate the performances of that period as the "Theatre of Mixed Means," clarifies the reputed "spontaneity" of those events -- most had some kind of script, but it was "vague enough to allow unexpected events to occur in an unpredictable succession.... The resulting actions are...indeterminate rather than improvised."[52]

As intended, the happenings of that period do not survive except in descriptions or reviews -- there is no way of gauging, without having seen them, the ways in which these performances attempted or refused to make meaning. And given the variety of the kinds of performances which fell into the category of "happenings," there seems to be little to unify them except the energetic proliferation of sensual stimuli and inventive ways of engaging the audience as integral parts of the performance. Barbara Haskell underscores the liveness of the performance event as a main sensual and conceptual feature of the Happenings, and Rose Lee Goldberg suggests that the purpose of these happenings was simply to break all theatrical conventions and to leave it up to the audience members to make sense of what they had seen. What these events had in common, Kostelantz argues was "a distinct distance from Renaissance theatre -- a distance that includes a rejection not only of the theatre of explicit statement and objectified plot but also the

visual clichés produced by unison movement, synchronous accompaniment, and complementary setting."[53]

Fluxus has also been notoriously difficult to define, and many of its artists contested whatever definitions were provided. The group owes its identity as a discernible movement to the organizational support of George Maciunas, a Lithuanian patron of the arts who, with his colleague Almus Salcius, had opened the Gallerie A/G Gallery on Madison avenue -- devoted to abstract expressionism, literary readings, and ancient music. After taking Richard Maxfield's classes in music composition at the New School, Maciunas began to sponsor events like the Chambers Street series and to provide editorial and financial support for the first anthology of contemporary peformance work. The name "Fluxus" was originally a title for the anthology, but it came to designate the group of avant-garde performance artists he championed, or rather a group of activities[54] generated by a roughly compatible sensibility.

A distinction between Fluxus events and Happenings might lie in their relationship to Abstract Expressionism -- while Allan Kaprow's route to Happenings was through a kind of "action collage" which suggested an expansion of abstract expressionism,[55] Fluxus rejected the voluble "physicality and gestural vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism, favoring instead a conceptual rigor and attentiveness to

'insignificant' phenomena."[56]

This conscious focus on critical awareness, or
heightened consciousness, made Fluxus more idea-oriented;
Lucy Lippard has deemed Fluxus "proto-conceptual art"[57]
because it anticipated or (or contributed to) artists of the
late 1960s' use of language, thought, and information as
artistic and as theatrical material. Thus it opened up,
within the performative, a valorization of performative
thinking and seeing which depended not on presence but on
the process of perception. In a lecture at Wesleyan in
1966, Yoko Ono articulated her own subtle sense of the
difference in the two performance modes:

> ...event, to me, is not an assimilation of all the
> other arts as Happening seems to be, but an
> extrication from the various sensory perceptions.
> It is not a get togetherness as most happenings
> are, but a dealing with oneself. Also, it has no
> script as Happenings do, though it has something
> that starts it moving -- the closest word for it
> may be a wish or a hope.... After unblocking one's
> mind, by dispensing with visual, auditory, and
> kinetic perceptions, what will come out of us?
> Would there be anything?[58]

This kind of open-ended questioning, about both the material
and the immaterial, left Fluxus in an ambivalent position

politically. George Brecht's sculpture "Sink" (1963), for example, just a real sink with soap, toothbrushes and a glass, could just as well have been a dispassionate presentation of commercialized American home life as a statement about the artist's subversion of his own expression.[59] This fundamental contradiction in the identity of the contemplative and dematerialized Fluxus has never been resolved, and the artists who participated (and still participate) in Fluxus events and exhibitions have never been able to agree on what they agreed on.[60] George Maciunas himself, who tried to institutionalize and politicize Fluxus (he was known for his "stridently pro-Soviet politics and his dictatorial attempts to impose his aesthetic ideas"[61]) drove most of the "original" Fluxus artists away. But it is the very ambivalence of the "Fluxus spirit" which is relevant to the continuing tension between aesthetics and politics in the conceptual art which followed in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The conceptualism of these years is by no means easy to describe. In her book Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972, curator and critic Lucy Lippard refuses to identify a movement, but rather tries to capture the "chaotic network of ideas in the air" and the "widely differing phenomena" happening in the art world within a six year time span by simply listing everything she

knows of that was published, performed, exhibited, or said about the dematerialization of the art object. The "chaos" of the very idea of "dematerialization" is, in fact, revealed on the first page of Lippard's text, where she contradicts herself: she describes the predominant tendency of this period as a "deemphasis on material aspects" of art, when she really means not deemphasis but "emphasis": two paragraphs later she points out the move out of formalist minimalism into a greater concern "with allowing materials rather than systems to determine the form of their work, reflected in the ubiquity of temporary 'piles' of materials from around 1968..." and that concern with materials was what led to the fascination with "...such ephemeral materials as time itself, space, nonvisual systems, situations, unrecorded experience, unspoken ideas, and so on."[62]

The confusion of this introductory set of statements reveals quite clearly that the flip side of the "dematerialization" of art was an intense awareness of and reaction to the materiality of the art object. The retreat from the idealization of the art object was in part a rejection of its flaws, or rather of the artist's flawed intervention in the ideas. Sol LeWitt's statement that "the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work"[63] and Joseph Kosuth's proclamation that he makes only "models"

because "the actual works of art are ideas"[64] bespeaks a
loss of faith in the imperfections or the institutionalized
destiny of the art object.

This preoccupation with destabilizing the art object
was also connected to an interrogation of the artist, often
a self-reflexive or "narcissistic" move towards a new egoism
of the body -- in which artists made themselves the object
of scrutiny.[65] Bruce Nauman is Robert Pincus-Witten's
example of an artist who, after a restless search among
materials and forms which would enable to him to make "a
less important thing to look at,"[66] and a number of
sculptural experiments in the kind of formlessness,
insubstantiality, and ultimate removal from the original and
the real, turned to the use of himself. Nauman, like Vito
Acconci, William Wegman, and, in a different spirit, Joan
Jonas and Martha Rosler, engaged a theatrical paradigm,
transforming their own identities as artists into
characters, often representing something more general for
the sake of parody or symbolic representation.

In the use of the self, Jonas' and Rosler's work, as
the work of women, stood in a slightly different
relationship to that of Nauman, Acconci, Wegman, and other
male artists doing precisely the same thing, as we will see
in chapter four. The use of the self as an art object was
conceptual in its origins, but feminist art practice

subsequently problematized, and focused the political issues of, the postmodernist aesthetics that continued to gain ground through the end of the 1960s.[67] The feminist use of performance -- to activate the body of the represented (traditionally women), to break out of the art traditions which had excluded women, to confront the audience with woman's "private" world, and generally to politicize the performance space -- restored a sense of political urgency to the conceptualism of the avant-garde. Yvonne Rainer, for example, who had studied with Cage and Cunningham, used the principles of chance and the broader vocabulary of movement opened up by Cunningham's attention to vernacular movement very differently than Cage and Cunningham did. For her these new modes of composition were, in the tradition of the avant-garde, a way out of the world as it is. She objected to Cage's "sunny disposition" and his apolitical stance towards art, and insisted that his aesthetics of

> nonhierarchical, indeterminate organization...
> [could] be used with a critical intelligence, that
> is, selectively and productively, not, however, so
> that we may awaken to this excellent life; on the
> contrary, so we may the more readily awaken to the
> ways in which we have been led to believe that
> this life is so excellent, just and right.[68]

As it developed, her philosophy of art was

diametrically opposed to Cage's -- we can see this in the following statement, not because of the things in dance that she rejects, but because of the scope of that rejection:

> NO to spectacle not to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator not to style no to camp no to seduction of the spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.[69]

Rainer's statement here signals a feminist postmodern aesthetics which would take the lead in shaping the political development of the postmodern avant-garde. Feminist artists such as Schneeman, Judy Chicago, and Martha Rosler, who found that their most personal issues could not be expressed in the formal means available to them, turned to media and modes of expression which had not been so formally defined -- Schneeman and Chicago turned from painting to performance and Rosler turned from painting to what she considered non-aesthetic media -- photography, video, performance, installations, and even texts and critical writing, to get out of the systems in which the representation of the feminine could not be rehabilitated.

Craig Owens has argued that the feminist insistence on

an incommensurable difference (specifically sexual
difference) which transcends binary oppositions in general,
represented by feminist artists' engagement of a postmodern
"indeterminacy," grounds and legitimizes postmodernism's
attempt to stage difference beyond opposition.[70] And
indeed, the materiality of the body and the materiality of
the feminine body have different valences as they are
explored in performance, and later video art. The question
we are posing, it might be helpful to remember here, is
whether this attempt of postmodernist art practice, by which
we mean the attempt to stage what Owens calls "difference
beyond opposition," is defeated or opened up in its
transposition to the video medium, with its revolutionary
power of appeal to the popular. Does the (capitalist)
logic, the (popular) idiom, and the (hegemonic) "whole flow"
of the television narrative inevitably coopt and deactivate
any new or subversive voice attempting to intervene in it?
(This is the question of chapter two.) Or does the material
specificity of voice and subjectivity have the potential to
intervene, transcend, or transform the "heteroglossia" of
the televisual discourse? (This is the question of chapter
three.)

3. The Paradoxes of Pop Art

Before addressing, in the next chapter, the critical
and theoretical terms in which a predominantly Marxist
cultural theory has discussed these questions, it may be
helpful to glance at the most historically accessible
predecessor to video art's optimistic engagement of the
media: pop art. The conceptual capitulation to the fact and
the dynamic of the mass media was heralded by "pop art,"[71]
which came to refer to works of an art practice which was,
in Lucy Lippard's words, "approaching the contemporary world
with a positive rather than a negative attitude."[72] Pop
art sprang up independently in Britain and America, but in
both countries it was American popular culture that
fascinated the artists. Andy Warhol's pop in particular,
which Martha Rosler described as a "multifaceted and
intricate confession of powerlessness,"[73] inspired strong
reactions which anticipated the logical tensions video art
would face.[74]

Max Kozloff, who wrote the first critical response to
Pop (though he called it "neo-Dada" and made it clear the
artists did not consider themselves a group) to appear in a
professional art journal, identified a number of important
themes which would be echoed in the subsequent controversy
over Pop.[75] In a 1962 review of recent shows by Jim Dine,

Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist,
Kozloff notes their common concern with the problems of the
commercial image and popular culture, their entry into
painting from other "métiers," their turn from the old
painterly "shock" techniques of using outrageous materials
and subverting the frame to a new perceptual challenge to
the viewer (he writes that instead "...they operate by a
metaphor which they know very well would be quite ridiculous
for us to accept: that their work is not what it assumes
itself to be -- the actual thing, or something terribly
close to it"),[76] the reversal of the abstract-
representational argument to demonstrate that "the
recognizable is not necessarily communicative at all,"[77]
the intention to let the spectator in on the irony, and the
displacement of the task of interpretation from the artist
to the audience. He describes this tendency in James
Rosenquist, thus:

> ...not merely do the images appear precreated, but
> the artist expects us, rather than himself, to
> contribute the imaginative values. He poses as
> the agent, not the author of the work.... One
> recalls Dali and his concept of the dream
> postcard, and even Blake, who considered himself
> merely God's secretary transcribing a heavenly
> vision.[78]

This phenomenon is the one which, I think, most disturbs Kozloff and later critics on both the left and the right: more than the pop artists' use of "vulgar" materials of commercialism, it is their retreat from the task of transforming the irrefutable reality and vulgarity of the commercial image that is objectionable. Kozloff writes that "the general rule underlying the new iconography is that there is no focus, no selectiveness about it. Anything goes, just as anything goes on the street."[79] As a result, it is impossible to determine their "overall attitude to American experience," the spectator feels both left out and condescended to, and

> ...no one knows whether there are essentially
> pictorial reasons for the new form, whether it is,
> perhaps, a dialogue with Pirandello (or Ionesco)
> now transposed to the realm of visual art, or
> whether, finally, they are in subversive collusion
> with Americana, while pleading the cause of
> loyalty to high art and a new beauty.[80]

Clearly, pop art was highly dialectical, and engendered a profound set of questions about the relationship between art and American life.

Robert Hughes (the Times art critic who wrote the television show and book The Shock of the New), even more clearly than Kozloff, embodies the formalist and modernist

denunciation of pop and of the conceptualism which followed.
Hughes sees Andy Warhol as an active agent in the demise of
the avant-garde -- Warhol's consignment of "the idea of the
avant-garde to its social parody, the world of fashion,
promotion, and commercial manipulation," led directly to the
dissolution of "the traditional ambitions and tensions of
the avant-garde," and "did more than any painter alive to
turn the art world into the art business."[81]

It was not Warhol's material he despised, but his
refusal to do anything with it. Of the pop generation, he
says, only Claes Oldenburg "took on the full weight of the
American commonplace -- its giganticism, its power as
spectacle."[82] Oldenburg's greatness, according to Hughes,
lies in his transformation of the commonplace -- his mastery
of the materials of pop rather than his acceptance of them.
And in this Oldenburg was one of the last great modernists:

> In his power of invention and his ability to
> create singular, obsessive images of
> metamorphosis, Oldenburg comes closer to Picasso's
> metamorphic powers than any American artist has
> yet done.[83]

Moreover, Hughes writes, his preference for Oldenburg over
Warhol is based expressly on Oldenburg's imposition of
himself on his materials -- the Expressionist physicality
with which he made the materials of mass culture speak of

himself. He writes that

> Oldenburg, in his desire to touch, squash, stroke,
> absorb, digest, and become what he saw, converting
> the most unlikely objects into metaphors of the
> body and the self, deployed a startling variety of
> textures and substances....[84]

Hughes did not see a connection between this kind of
transformation of materials and the performance, feminist,
and media art of the 1960s and 1970s we have been
discussing, though he argues elsewhere for the efficacy of
the "ideas and rhetoric" of the performative movement of
Futurism.[85] Deplorable though those "ideas and rhetoric"
might have been, Hughes grants the political force of their
concepts, without drawing a lesson from them, as Walter
Benjamin did, in his call to combat them on their own
aesthetic and technological grounds.[86] And then he fails
to take into account the art that was truly trying to
liquidate the institutionalization process Hughes himself
deplores, the continuance of the Fluxus effort to make
"unassimilable" art forms, which by the seventies had turned
more and more to performance and to the media (as Futurism
did).

Hughes' objection to the kind confession of
powerlessness-before-mass media enacted by Warhol, and his
preference for Oldenburg's Picassian powers of

transformation, is not simply an aesthetic preference or an expression of Hughes' modernism. It is based on a fear of the power of the dissolution of the barriers between "art" and "life"[87] and between high and popular culture, and it underwrites a particular ideology:

> The 'democratic,' uncritical view of mass reality
> that was supposed to be part and parcel of Pop --
> although it was never shared by Oldenburg -- had
> begun, by 1965, to affect the very structure of
> the art world itself, altering its implied
> contracts, changing what the audience (and so the
> artists) expected of art.[88]

Such a fear of the power of the popular represents an extraordinary resistance and hostility to the kind of conceptual art which flourished in the 1970s, a persistent fear of the "mainstream" reception of pop which must be taken into account. This fear resurfaces, surprisingly, in discourse about experimental video. Hughes' reading of pop also represents the kind of failure of vision exhibited by many disappointed modern art critics fearful of the mass media (including Fredric Jameson, whose response to Warhol we will critique in chapter two).

Hughes misunderstood, for instance, Warhol's use of repetition, which he distinguishes firmly from Monet's use of repetition in his famous haystack paintings. Warhol, in

extracting repetition cynically from mass culture, wanted to be a "machine";[89] he loved the sameness of the mass product, the infinite series of identical objects. Monet, on the other hand, sought the difference in repetition. In his haystack and lily pond series, Hughes writes, Monet wanted to show

> ...in the resplendent detail of nuances, that
> phenomena are not standardized. His "repetitions"
> were done to glorify the eye, to show how it could
> discern tiny differences, and how these
> differences added up to a continuous alteration of
> reality.[90]

The contrast here does not seem valid. For one thing, there is less difference between Warhol's use of repetition and the dispassionate or scientific realism of Flaubert, Manet, and Degas, the "...wintry perfection of nuanced observation, expository, not didactic....[which] did not aim to show things as they might be but as they actually were,"[91] than Hughes believes. Warhol's use of repetition does not prevent the eye from discerning tiny differences among the images, especially since his silk screens were not identical. My experience of a wallful of Warhol images is that one does, in fact, look for the differences among the images, and one finds them -- the Monroe in the upper left-hand corner, done in green, is very different in feel from

the Monroe in the middle of the far right column, done in
yellow. The difference Hughes is really talking about is
that Monet glorified the _artist's_ eye, in Monet's paintings
-- the shades of difference are perceived _for_ us before they
are perceived _by_ us. In Warhol's use of repetition the
burden of discernment, the glorious eye, is the viewer's.

Rosalind Krauss has described another confusion in the
formalist and modernist art critical response to minimalism
and pop. Michael Fried's denunciation of its
"theatricality," he explains, was grounded in a desire to
locate Art "within the domain of the virtual," to render
matter, as Greenberg prescribed, entirely optical.

> The last place that 'Art and Objecthood' would
> look for these effects is in the world of pop art,
> and yet in Warhol's screen paintings (just to take
> one example), with their grainy overlays of Day-
> Glo color separations carefully slid off-register,
> we encounter a treatment of pictorial surface that
> constantly ingests or eradicates the objects it
> supposedly proffers, forcing them to hover in an
> unlocatable nonspace. And we realize that here
> indeed is just that production of virtuality -- of
> the field rendered optical 'like a mirage' --
> facilitated by the mediumization of shape. The
> effulgence of Warhol's surfaces, their floating

fields of acrid, smarting color, or the glassy

passages of matter stretched beyond comprehensible

shape in James Rosenquist's pictorial

compartments, or the open, weightless suspensions

of Lichenstein's Ben-Day dots -- these constitute

in their own way a parallel opticality.[92]

Krauss' acute observation of a "parallel opticality"

describes the increasing willingness, in the avant-garde, to

see the interface between art and politics, which in the

1970s seemed increasingly to demand a recognition of the

interface between art, communication, and the social world.

And the force behind that urge was always a performative

force, the desire to step outside of the institution that so

quickly forms around the art object. It is the performative

aesthetic that Hughes notes himself in the above quote.

And, as Henry Sayre has argued, it is the performative which

took over the art world in the 1970s.

Sayre's attention to another set of tensions in the art

world, increasingly expressed in performance, illuminates,

for instance, the productive tension in Warhol's work, which

Sayre thinks generated an undecidable confusion of "the

vernacular and the mediated."[93] If a video artist agrees

to broadcast his or her work on television, he or she

becomes part of the system, but is also in a position of

power from which he or she can affect it. Warhol modelled a

certain apolitical vacillation between the roles of 1) a
businessman, 2) a slave to the society column, and 3) a
serious artist commenting on the commodity status of art.
Sayre says Warhol's significance is his acceptance, however
ironic, of the fact that the contemporary artist must role-
play -- that

> to return art to social praxis, as the avant-garde
> wishes to do, is inevitably to return art to the
> marketplace, life and the marketplace being so
> inextricably linked in contemporary society that
> it is impossible to disengage them. Hence
> Warhol's unpopularity among leftist critics -- he
> reveals the idealism latent in their notion of a
> socially engaged art. They act as if it were
> possible, today, to disengage social life from
> commodity society.[94]

Sayre goes on to point out that if Warhol's work is a
deconstruction of the commodity status of the art work, it
inevitably preserves what is denounced, even if "sous
rature," but that this undecidability about which side the
art is on, may be, as De Man suggests, the "logical tension
that prevents...[the] closure" of postmodern art.[95]

4. Critique or Affirmation?

The logical tension Pop Art provoked by submitting itself to mass art and popular culture is relevant to the dilemma facing experimental video. As Pop's complexities were misconstrued by the neo-conservativism of Hughes and Fried, so the reception of experimental video has been complicated by the effect of Adorno and Horkheimer's famous rejection of "the culture industry" (the subject of the next chapter).[96]

But experimental video makers, like Pop artists, are acutely aware of the impossibility/possibility of their effort to fuse the critical potential of conceptual art and the revolutionary potential of a mass media. In fact, many video artists began with an ideal reminiscent of the Frankfurt School's -- that a valid and "free" art practice in the medium of the culture industry must begin with an institutional resistance to the mass media.[97] Thus "social negativity"[98] meant operating literally outside of Marcuse's "one-dimensional" culture and Adorno and Horkheimer's "culture industry." One also stayed away from any possible institutionalization of one's work; popularity and commercial success meant instant absorption by the culture industry. This materialist opposition simplified

the sense of purpose for many video makers, whose work had a small audience (often only other video artists) and little feedback.

The aesthetic of this oppositional practice was also simple at first, at least in the sense that its rules were clear: one expressed one's critical response to television either through satire or by taking as a main theme the way we are positioned as viewers. Every experiment with difference from television derived its force from this differentiation. It also simplified analysis for video critics. Despite the considerable aesthetic differences from one video to another, they were relentlessly described in terms of this "resistance."

However, even as this concept of resistance was put into practice, video technology available to independent media became more complex (and thus closer in its vocabulary to television), and the clarity and meaning of this kind of opposition began to erode; a number of video artists began working within the "system," to reach more people and shed the autonomy of the art world. Some merely expressed their desire to do so,[99] while others, such as Nam June Paik, for example, began in 1968 to work on a video synthesizer with Shuya Abe and to collaborate with other artists sponsored by WGBH-TV, Boston's public television station, in producing "The Medium is the Medium." The Paik-Abe synthesizer, whose

design was distributed to fellow artists and to the public
for free, represented "...the fact that artists could take
the next step into the core of television by reinventing the
tools of production to fit their own needs."[100] At the
same time the "guerrilla television" movement gained
momentum, as video collectives such as TVTV gained
recognition for the force and originality of their
independent documentaries (particularly "Four More Years"
[1972] covering the Republican convention).

This move into collaboration with the television
industry complicated the politics of the movement, and its
fate (during the late 1970s public television's support for
alternative video disappeared) complicates a retrospective
theory of the efficacy of alternative media still further.
The consensus among those writing about the period is that
alternative movements were ultimately defeated by their
absorption into mainstream aesthetics. Guerrilla television
influenced broadcast journalism. TVTV's main producer went
on to make "The Big Chill." The award-winning documentary
"The Police Tapes" (1976), by Alan and Susan Raymond,
inspired the television series "Hill Street Blues."[101]
Such developments prompted reassessments of the aesthetics
and politics of popular (media) culture, most of which see
the Frankfurt School's theories either confirmed
(postmodernist Marxists such as Fredric Jameson, Raymond

Williams) or defunct in the face of a new awareness of the fundamental instability of language (poststructuralism).

But long before this opposition/cooptation binarism reached a deadlock, it ceased to be a valid lens on the praxis of video art. The most interesting and resonant work, such as Nam June Paik's, lives in a liminal state and the most interesting response to such work is critical and interpretive which is what the Frankfurt school theorists were best at in practice. Nam June Paik, among others, "relishes the contradictions inherent in the very idea of the interface of an uncompromised aesthetic and politics within a context of total compromise that is broadcast TV."[102] Thus Nam June Paik's immersion in video has been unprogrammatic and contradictory -- he has tried both to get further inside the television image[103] and to remain forever positioned outside of it. Paik engages contradictory impulses: the effort to reinscribe the human body in its system of representation, and the broader sociological, if not political, effort to understand and celebrate the relationship of the medium to music, time and space, to randomness and indeterminacy, to information, and to the prospect of a global television.[104] Though his work was never particularly activist, his investment in video always had a populist strain, one which has kept one eye on the television viewer and the culture of entertainment, and

another on the need to transform that system. His oft-
quoted explanation of his "carnivalesque" style, "I am a
poor man from a poor country, so I have to be entertaining
all the time,"[105] is in itself a comment on the system he
was trying to subvert.

In fact, Fluxus and the Frankfurt School are linked
both philosophically and historically, through the
coincidence that both John Cage and Adorno studied music
with Schönberg in Vienna, and were both influenced not only
by Schönberg's experiments with atonality and his faith in
the value of the contradictions expressed by the release of
unconscious impulses, but also by his experimentalism -- by
the notion, as Gregory Ulmer puts it, that

> ... music should be a kind of research, an
> exploration of the logic of materials, which in
> Cage's case became extended to include not just
> the materials of music but everything in the
> natural and cultural worlds.[106]

Nam June Paik's first work in video was a result of his work
with Cage and their shared interest in the materiality of
music -- which, like video, was increasingly dependent on
electronic tape for recording and composing. He brought
many of his ideas from his work on composition in West
Germany into his experimental video, whence he also brought
a complex concept of art as "negation" and critique of

social history.

But this moment of historical conjunction was also the decisive moment of divergence between the Frankfurt school's thinking and what would become Fluxus. Though the Fluxus artists incorporated a sense of the value of "negation" into their work, Fluxus artists envisioned a move forward into the age of mass culture which the Frankfurt school thought impossible. Adorno's interest in the "logic of materials" was not as interdisciplinary as Cage's, and ultimately not as complacent about technology's influence on that logic. While Cage's "research" extended a processual musical sensibility and attention to objects, seeing technology as a way to help see into the process _in_ objects,[107] Adorno's research was concerned with the ways in which music, which _should_ be free (processual, improvisatory) was fixed and thus commodified by the technological rationalism of twentieth century capitalist culture, and thus deprived of its spontaneity and turned into an object.[108] This difference is critical to the divergent theoretical, political, and aesthetic influence both Cage and Adorno were to have on the reception of postmodern art practice. However, their unifying assumption that music -- and thus performative and time-based art -- was a realm of aesthetic freedom with the potential for constant experiment and avoidance of system, and the mediating influence of Walter

Benjamin, who saw revolutionary potential in the kind of dialectical mediation of social life exemplified by Brecht's epic theatre, suggests the possibility that (as I argue in the last chapter) the kind of critique and social theory posited and modeled by the Frankfurt school is still the most relevant to an adequate concept of the aesthetics and politics of experimental video.

II. Marxism and Media Theory

The aesthetic-political significance of experimental video's efforts to remake television has been circumscribed by Marxist and Marxist-inflected theories of the relationship between cultural praxis and transformation of the social sphere. In this chapter we will review some of the predominant concerns expressed by those theories: the relationships between the individual subject and the discourse of the mass media, the correlation between cultural forms and ideology, and the fate and meaning of the critical autonomy of art in an age of mass culture.

Though the Frankfurt school saw these issues as interrelated, the last (and most difficult) has almost disappeared from contemporary cultural theory, along with the modernist faith in art as a tranformative influence on culture. Meanwhile, the Frankfurt school's vision of the "culture industry" as the defeat of art's autonomy, the triumph of capitalism over social life, and the aestheticization of politics has had a strong influence on Marxist media theory that followed. This influence has tended in two directions: on the one hand, toward increasingly precise descriptions of the "affirmative character of culture," and on the other towards a

reconsideration of oppositional praxis not in terms of art, but in terms of the "popular," everyday oppositional strategies of the average consumer of mass culture.

After a discussion of that development, this chapter will address the dismissal of video art by two theorists whose theories lie on this grid: John Fiske, the television scholar whose work is grounded in the British cultural studies tradition, and by Fredric Jameson, a literary critic whose scope of cultural analysis is significantly broader. As I will show, even as sophisticated a critic as Jameson's attempts to negotiate between Marxist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytical, and postmodernist theories have led to a position on experimental video's place in the matrix of culture and media in a manner that fails to do justice to the praxis of video-making.

1. Marxist Theories of the Media

Marxist theories of the media begin with the classical base-superstructure model of culture: that culture is determined by modes of production. This relationship is made newly convincing and vivid in the history of the modern communications industry: the commercial structure of the communications industry crippled the development of media technology and kept radio and television limited to the one-way broadcast until recently, when entrepreneurs were

finally ready to capitalize on "interactive" cable. This
fact of the history of modern "communications" (a word which
has shifted in meaning to connote not dialogue but mass
organization and distribution of information and culture)
has affected the structure of mass societies in a way that
may be, as Hans Magnus Enzensberger argues, analogous to the
social division of labor in the industrialization of
society.

> The technical distinction between receivers
> and transmitters reflects the social division
> of labor into producers and consumers, which
> in the consciousness industry becomes of
> particular importance. It is based, in the
> last analysis, on the basic contradiction
> between the ruling class and the ruled class
> -- that is to say, between monopoly capital
> or monopolistic bureaucracy on the one hand
> and the dependent masses on the other.[1]

The argument is that the mass media could not have been
developed, at least not nearly as quickly, without the
backing of commercial industry for the purpose of
advertising. The bourgeoisie's colonization of the ether
was just as historically necessary to the future of a
communications system which could enable a global unity as
the bourgeoisie's demolition of the old order was

historically necessary for the expansion of society's
productive capacity. Thus the continued relevance of the
language of Marx' and Engels' Communist "Manifesto":

> Constant revolutionising of production,
> uninterrupted disturbance of all social
> conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation
> distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier
> ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with
> their train of ancient and venerable prejudices
> and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones
> become antiquated before they can ossify. All
> that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is
> profane....[2]

But the question of whether the commercial media, if they
can be harnessed by revolutionary forces, are the means of
liquidating the cultural tradition (just as industrial-
ization was a progressive force liquidating the system of
land ownership) is the question on which Marxist media
theorists part.

The philosophers who have come to be known as the
Frankfurt School weren't sure. Having witnessed the
apocalypse of civilization, the "eclipse of reason," in
Horkheimer's phrase,[3] in Nazi Germany, and the facilitation
of totalitarianism by the aestheticization of politics in
mass culture, the scholars of the Frankfurt School,

particularly Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert
Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin, saw the mass media as
dangerous, as a potential instrument of fascism. That
premise led to intensive theoretical analyses of the
relationship between aesthetics and politics in mass
culture. Although that work can by no means be summarized
or even synthesized into one particular project or
theoretical position, Martin Jay has described some of its
distinctive features.[4] The Frankfurt School differentiated
itself from both the mainstream "bourgeois" audience of
modern art and its orthodox Marxist competitors in its
development of a mode of cultural analysis which was 1)
synthetic, integrating art criticism with more general
critiques of culture; 2) anti-systematic; Critical Theory
differentiated itself from its more orthodox Marxist
predecessors by refusing to see cultural phenomena as the
simple reflection of class interests; and 3) creative, often
seeking to manifest in a new mode of philosophical writing
or praxis the complexities it was discussing.[5]

At the heart of the goal and style of Critical Theory,
as it has come to be called, is the notion that culture must
retain a dialectical and not a conspiratorial relationship
with political movements. Art and social life are
profoundly interconnected -- art reflects social life, and
yet only creative praxis and artistic imagination is

generative of independent thought. It is this dialectical
relationship that was threatened, particularly in Adorno and
Horkheimer's view, by mass culture. In "Art and Mass
Culture," Horkheimer had written that a common humanity, and
thus a politics, informed every aesthetic act, whether the
artist recognized it or not,[6] and the implications of this
statement seemed to be multiplied by the prospect of an art
practice in the medium of the popular and the political.

But the various aesthetic theories of the Frankfurt
school scholars were full of contradictions as to the locus
of the genuine negativity of critical art.[7] The concepts
with which they described the autonomous art object were
ultimately not medium-specific -- although Adorno and
Horkheimer argued in <u>Dialectic of Enlightenment</u> that the
culture industry obliterated the distinction between the
general and the particular,[8] Adorno restated this
relationship in a more open-ended way:

> The authentic cultural object must retain and
> preserve whatever goes by the wayside in that
> process of increasing domination over nature which
> is reflected by expanding rationality and ever
> more rational forms of domination. Culture is the
> perennial protestation of the particular against
> the general, as long as the latter remains
> irreconcilable with the particular.[9]

Adorno also wrote that "Defiance of society includes defiance of its language,"[10] a concept which, though it was based on the precedent of modernism, raised the value of "defiance" to a transcendent concept, one which would suit all oppositional movements. And, in an age when the televisual had become, at a minimum, part of society's language, defiance of it seemed necessary.

And yet defiance of television's language had become, especially to Adorno, impossible. This dilemma is at the center of the theoretical deadlock aesthetic theory of independent video now faces. In Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man[11] and in Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment, the Germans painted a grim picture of the possibility of aesthetic intervention in the American "culture industry," a picture which influenced cultural and media theory for decades afterwards. In this seminal historical interpretation of the lasting cultural significance of the Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer describe the telos of the Enlightenment as the progressive "disenchantment" of society and the dissolution of myth and magic. In a rational world, reality is severed from "essence," and the world becomes controllable, calculable, mappable. There is no longer an outside to culture; thus there is no longer a realm of true freedom. Man becomes alienated from nature as he gains control over it: "Men pay

for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise that power."[12] And the culture industry, as Adorno and Horkheimer describe it (as did Marcuse in One Dimensional Man) is the ultimate manifestation of that technological rationalism, which absorbs and assigns to its place every genuine aesthetic and critical impulse, thus making every element of it "affirmative," and making escape and independent thought -- real or imaginary -- impossible.

The concept of the necessity of art's autonomy from this culture has been oversimplified by both critics and followers of the Frankfurt school; there were several elements in this body of thought (which was never a "system") which worked against the implication that art could not intervene in the increasingly hegemonic media culture which was coming to define social reality.[13] For one thing, for the sake of avoiding reductionism, Adorno and Horkheimer were reluctant to close off the possibility of negativity even in an affirmative culture, a tendency which Adorno was always careful to criticize in other cultural critics. For another, the complex notion of "happiness" which was the utopian hope of the Frankfurt School included a dimension of pure material pleasure, the kind that popular culture enjoys.[14] Marcuse, in fact, defended hedonism and in the 1960s endorsed the counterculture and the popular

music of the time.[15] And despite his suspicion of an image

culture, particularly of television,[16] Adorno argued

against the dismissal of appearances as insubstantial -- a

dismissal seemingly in accord with the suspicion of the

aestheticization of mass media and the culture industry.

Adorno argued "As the reflction [sic] of truth, appearances

are dialectical; to reject all appearance is to fall

completely under its sway, since truth is abandoned with the

rubble without which it cannot appear."[17] As I will argue

in chapter three, the Frankfurt school's fundamental

commitment to subjective praxis, to sensory pleasure and

perception, and to dialectical mediation and thought in

their studies of cultural phenomena, reflected especially in

Benjamin's study of the Paris arcades and Adorno's studies

of music, illuminate still-unparalleled insights into the

dynamic between the aesthetic and the social which, if

applied more fully to the contemporary media, would have

precluded any ultimate abandonment of the hope of

intervening in the social reality of television.

But the subtleties of the Frankfurt school's analyses

have been over-simplified into broad doctrines in the

theories which followed in their wake. The first such

doctrine is "access". Hans Magnus Enzensberger argues that

the first priority of the Left must be to gain access to the

media. He criticizes the Frankfurt School's retreat from

the media, arguing that Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht were in fact the only Marxists to understand its "socialist possibilities."[18] Enzensberger's hope is based on an enthusiasm for the media's destructive and liberating potential. This can only be achieved through the Left's engagement with it, for the purpose of "releasing the emancipatory potential which is inherent in the new productive forces."[19] Instead of retreating from it, he urges, the Left must "take up the struggle for their own wavelengths and must, within the foreseeable future, build their own transmitters and relay stations."[20]

Enzensberger's position stresses only the acquisition of the technology as a form of a means of production. Once that is organized, he implies, the political messages will take care of themselves. Frustrated with the Left's fear of the media, he warns that "If the socialist movement writes off the new productive forces of the consciousness industry and relegates work on the media to a subculture, then we have a vicious circle."[21] The Left's unpopularity, he implies, is a result of a "physical" rather than a "spiritual" inaccessibility, as Renato Poggioli would put it, so its attempts to represent the underrepresented people and to expose unpopular truths about the American media are blocked mainly by problems of access. The implication is that "the interests of the masses have remained a relatively

unknown field" because they haven't had the kind of
publicity the dominant culture has had. Access,
Enzensberger argues, is key, and in those terms, he said in
1974, "the apolitical [avant-garde] have made much more
progress in dealing with the media than any grouping of the
Left."[22]

The avant-garde, interested in the 1960s in
"liquidating" or dematerializing art objects and art
institutions, engaged video in the way Enzensberger
describes, taking on the medium in the spirit of "research"
or "play." During the same period, many activists using
video "believed that the television revolution could be
sparked simply by putting inexpensive, portable equipment
into the hands of the public."[23] Nevertheless,
Enzensberger distinguishes them from the Left, calling both
the "apolitical avant garde" (such as Warhol and Cage) and
the "underground" merely "innocents," with "no political
viewpoint of [their] own."[24] The appeal of McLuhan's
famous dictum, "the medium is the message," he says, reveals
that indeed the bourgeoisie has nothing to say: "It wants
the media as such and to no purpose."[25]

The second main thematic fallout of the Frankfurt
school's diagnosis of mass culture has been the issue of the
individual's relation to culture. Adorno and Horkheimer
argued that the mechanism of film itself destroys

independent thought and imagination:

> The stunting of the mass-media consumer's powers
> of imagination and spontaneity does not have to be
> traced back to any psychological mechanisms; he
> must ascribe the loss of those attributes to the
> objective nature of the products themselves,
> especially to the most characteristic of them, the
> sound film. They are so designed that quickness,
> powers of observation, and experience are
> undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet
> sustained thought is out of the question.[26]

Marxist media theorists have been at pains ever since to determine the "purpose" of the media in terms of its effect on the audience -- or, since Althusser, on the "subject," an issue which parallels the classical Marxist problem of defining the proletariat. Enzensberger doesn't concern himself with the intricacies of mass cultural rhetoric or the identity of the audience, and he grants that it is over the question of organizing the individual participants for a "socialist strategy of the media" that "socialist concepts part company with neo-liberal and technocratic ones."[27] He assumes, however, that it is in the interest of the masses to espouse the "destructive, cathartic" aspect of the new media and its "liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage."[28]

2. Screen Theory, Cultural Studies, and John Fiske

The argument that the "masses" would benefit by a
radical transformation of the media has been the sticking
point for media theory ever since the Brecht-Lukács debate,
in 1938, over whether modernist techniques (expressionism)
or classical realism provided a truer or more useful picture
of reality.[29] This controversy hinged on the question of
the social effectivity and historical meaning of
modernism.[30] In the 1970s, the British journal Screen
began working out the implications of that issue for film,
thinking systematically about the relationship between
language, ideology, and the subject (what Stuart Hall dubbed
"screen theory"), and also on the ideological coding in the
mass cultural photographic message and the filmic narrative,
features that Adorno and Horkheimer had identified in mass
culture[31] but traditional Marxist criticism had been unable
to theorize.[32] This work continued the critique of realism
begun in the Brecht-Lukács debate and tended toward the
Brechtian argument that true realism depended on the
exposure of contradictions in social life, and not on the
harmonious presentation of the whole shape of social
relations (Lukács' position). In general, Screen analyzed
the ideology functioning in the formal techniques of the

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media culture, especially Hollywood film.

The rigorous analyses of _Screen_ made invaluable
contributions to a theory of representation in the camera
arts. Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath in particular
critiqued the conventions of realism and the "narrative
space" in the cinema. Stephen Heath critiqued the tradition
of the Quattrocento system, which arranges scenographic
space as a spectacle for the viewer, who is thus accorded a
position of illusory mastery over the scene.[33] Colin
MacCabe argued that conventional or "realistic" forms in the
media, even if they expressed a "radical" opinion, tend to
resolve contradictions rather than exposing them to the
viewer, and thus prevent the development of a radical or
critical response.[34] Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure
and Narrative Cinema" described how the "visual pleasure,"
or "scopophilia," of film viewing positions the audience,
both male and female, as a male spectator, because the mode
of the feminine in film is not active, but passive, the
object of the (male) gaze.[35]

In this careful scrutiny of the operations of classic
cinema, _Screen_ was aiming to get a handle on exactly how
mass cultural texts did what Adorno and Horkheimer said they
did, so as to offer an alternative. The "scientific"
understanding of the subject's operation lent to it by Lacan
grounded the _Screen_ project, and _Screen_ felt that it could

actually prescribe the kind of socialist strategy for the media vaguely imagined by Enzensberger. It considered itself to have gone beyond Barthes' "Pleasure of the Text," which offered an image only of "moments" of subversion, and to be able to offer more comprehensive and less rudimentary "strategies of subversion."[36]

Towards the end of the decade, however, Screen revised its position. Althusser was moving towards a more processual formulation of the relationship between ideology and culture, arguing that the social formation, knowlege, and the subject are all products of a number of unstable but hegemonic practices, which ended up formulating in particular the "subject" as "a dispersed, heterogeneous effect" though still an effect of the "interpellation" of ideology."[37] Influenced by Althusser's move and stirred by objections to its positioning of the spectator, Screen came to the poststructuralist conclusion that the reader reads the text as much as the text positions the reader.[38]

The work which has come to be known as cultural studies, led primarily by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, emerged against and out of the work of Screen. Williams stands out in this history as an idiosyncratic figure, both inside and outside of the Marxist tradition. Refusing the base/superstructure distinction insisted on by British Marxist scholars in the 1950s, Williams declared that he was

not a Marxist. He was just as interested in the practices of culture and in the history of the interaction between culture, the imagination,[39] and the structures of feeling as he was in the socioeconomic determinants of culture. Through a rigorous attention to his own and broader social tendencies in the consumption of culture, Williams maintained a faith in the dialectic between the individual "reader" and the "active presence -- assisting and resisting -- of the wider forces of a language and a society."[40]

When in <u>Marxism and Literature</u>, Williams addressed the relevance of this interactivity to Marxism, historical materialism, and to the Frankfurt school, calling for attention to the "practices" as well as the "objects" of culture,[41] many came to view Williams as the most original and dialectical figure in British cultural studies. As Terry Eagleton put it,

> ...while other materialist thinkers, including myself, diverted into structuralist Marxism, Williams sustained his historicist humanism only to find such theoreticians returning under changed political conditions to examine that case less cavalierly, if not to endorse it uncritically.[42]

Inspired by Williams' less systematic approach, cultural studies grew into an interdisciplinary field of inquiry which refused (and still refuses) to define itself,[43] but

which set about investigating, as Stuart Hall put it,
"awkward but relevant issues about contemporary society and
culture"[44] from a variety of theoretical standpoints.
Cultural studies attempted to intervene in the absolute
position accorded to the "subject" in Screen's arresting
synthesis of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism
in the interest of gauging "the complex relations between
representations/ideological forms and the density or
'creativity' of 'lived' cultural forms."[45]

Among the cultural forms to be immediately recovered in
a more contextual, processual theory were the popular and
the realistic. Shifting the focus Screen had maintained on
the necessity of subverting conventional realism, Williams
(whose work tended to focus on the moderate over the
radical) and cultural studies began to study the popular,
reminding us of Brecht's connection between popularity and
realism.[46] The refusal to reject realism as potentially
critical derived not from a wish to reject the avant-garde,
but rather to remind us of the popularity -- and thus the
effectivity -- of realism and naturalism, when used and read
critically and dialectically. More important than the
discussion of realism in this reconceptualization is a new
emphasis on the audience's capacity to see through formal
technique, and recognize subversive content. In what Colin
MacCabe calls an "anthropological turn... whereby our own

culture became an object of study like any other,"[47] cultural studies moved toward an abdication of critical authority toward a more open eye on precisely those processes whereby the subject interacts with culture in everyday life, keeping in mind Williams' statement that "No mode of production...no dominant society...no dominant culture, in reality exhausts human practice, human energy, human intention."[48]

Within this tradition, the praxis of experimental video in the United States has been bracketed out; only recently has it begun to draw attention as a cultural phenomenon which can finally be said to have relevance to broader cultural concerns. An article in Screen by William Boddy raises the issue of alternative television, for the reason that it is now connected to popular experience:

> While animated by a revolt against the by-then hegemonic place of commercial broadcasting in defining the television apparatus, in retrospect much of the neo-Dada work also seems to replay wider contemporary anxieties accompanying the installation of the TV set as a domestic object in the American home.[49]

Boddy describes the guerilla television movement as in itself apolitical, or "post-political" (using Raindance's ironic formulation in Guerilla Television against itself),

or caught up in a "technological determinism... [which] obliterates history and politics altogether."[50] And though he notes that the video guerrillas have affected the changing popular conception of American television as the networks have come under increasing attack, he sees the elements of that effect as institutional (the rise of cable) rather than aesthetic or rhetorical.

Meanwhile, cultural studies generated a great variety of rich analyses of the aesthetics and rhetoric of popular television, and of the way audiences interact with it. John Fiske was among the first of those to bring a cultural studies perspective to communication studies in this country.[51] Fiske's seminal book Television Culture is a pragmatic and comprehensive application of the approach of cultural studies to American popular television. In it Fiske covers and counters Marxist, semiotic, psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, and ethnographic methodologies in the service of two main arguments. The first, directed against Screen's Althusserian notion of the interpellated or fixed subject, revalidates "the ability and the freedom of the viewer to bring extra-textual experience and attitudes to bear" on their television viewing.[52] The second, directed against Screen's insistence on radical forms, revalidates "popular" and conventional "realist" texts as the modes more likely to generate social change.

From these contentions Fiske emerges with the thesis that popular culture is not defined or circumscribed by the culture industry, but is rather a polyvalent array of resistant activities. Though television is a commercial and hegemonic institution which attempts to position the consumer in a particular place, popular culture is not identical with that institution but resistant to it. Mass culture, he argues following the Frankfurt school, must be diverse in order to be popular, but in its diversity it provides a "polysemic" and unstable text, to which viewers have an active relationship. Popular culture, then, is not identical with television's purposes but is rather an activity of every viewer as they forge meanings and recuperate <u>pleasure</u> from social experience.

The notion of "pleasure" as a politicizing force has two implications. First, it is connected to physical pleasure, (discussed further below) and second it is synonymous with "relevance," which is Fiske's criterion for a socially accessible political message. Thus, he writes, "the moment of semiosis is when social allegiances and discursive practices are personified and held in relative stability on a point of relevance."[53] The relevance or "text-as-menu" position accords precedence to the discursive practices of the viewer over those of the text, so that the text is seen as more passive and open, to be activated only

by the personified semiotic process.

This recognition of the politics of the everyday, of the indirect politics of the viewers' various strategies of resistance, "is predicated on the ability of the viewer to read radically."[54] In this reconceptualization of the cultural process in the age of the mass media, Fiske shifts the responsibility for critical cultural activity from the artist, where the Frankfurt school put it, to the viewer. This move is not apolitical or ambivalent. He takes pains to remind us that this aspect of the reader's "power" is a "bottom-up" power. The new job of critical theory, he argues, which has already exposed the forces of domination at work, is to understand the nature of this power and to "extend this understanding to cover the forces of resistance, evasion, and opposition that constitute the tactics of the subordinate, that are the everyday means of handling the forces of domination."[55]

It would seem that a theory of "resistant" viewing, which depends on the audience's ability to see "radically," would include the converse possibility: that if the average viewer can see radically, then the range of texts (both "radical" and "popular") accessible to the audience would be broader. In other words, a sophisticated audience might find an experimental videotext just as accessible as Charlie's Angels. Instead Fiske, who evicts the "aesthetic"

and the "humanist" elements of culture from cultural studies,[56] limits his interest in the progressive political potential of popular culture to television itself. In a presentation of a chapter from <u>Understanding Popular Culture</u> at Northwestern, Fiske explained his theory that it is the popular, rather than the "radical," that has more of a chance of effecting social change.[57] The radical is never popular because it's not <u>relevant</u>, and the Left needs to pay attention to the micropolitical level of the popular. He writes, "the political effectivity of radical art is limited by its inability to be relevant to the everyday life of the people, and, by the same token, any radicalness of popular art is equally limited by the same requirement of relevance."[58] In making this argument, that the appeal of the avant-garde is limited by its inability to be "popular," Fiske brings Brecht's reminder of the efficacy of the popular full circle, only Fiske thus sides with Lukács -- calling the avant-garde "irrelevant" is close to calling it "decadent," as Lukács did.

Nevertheless, Fiske's recognition that the average viewer is capable of "radical seeing" has potential, as does his notion of "pleasure" as a subversive element of popular culture. Fiske posits the body as a site of meaning in television, both describing the cultural codes which are inscribed on the body, and evoking the subversive quality of

the articulation of the body which communicates physically, outside language; "...in the body of the text... responded to by the body of the reader."[59] After Barthes, Fiske argues that it is a distinctly physical pleasure through which subordinated classes have historically subverted official culture.[60] Of the two types Barthes describes, plaisir and jouissance, Fiske argues that television usually provides plaisir, "a mundane pleasure that is essentially confirming."[61] Occasionally, however, television texts might occasionally provide jouissance, which, like Freud's "affect," is an intensity of pleasure, a pleasure of the body (the word translates as bliss, ecstasy, or orgasm) rather than an intellectual or aesthetic pleasure. Jouissance "escapes the control of culture and of meaning by 'distancing the signified' and thus foregrounding the signifier, particularly the way it is materialized."[62] Television's aesthetic strategies, such as slow motion, low camera angle, and celebratory editing, tend to amplify and celebrate performance, as in sport.[63]

The understanding of physical pleasure as subversive or evasive of the meanings or codes otherwise disseminated by the dominant culture is a much-discussed one in literary and performance theory, especially since Bakhtin's articulation of the materiality of the sign. But the models of carnivalesque and ritualistic performances on which it

imaginatively rests, especially for performance theorists
after Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, don't quite match
television culture, in which subversion never actually
happens -- it is provided. ·Thus Fiske's thesis that popular
pleasures generated by television alone empower the
subordinate is suspect. Certainly they constitute a force
to be engaged or attended to, particularly in a cultural
field that increasingly isolates the body, but there are
productive and unproductive ways of engaging this force.
Pornography can certainly provoke a pleasure of the body
which can be subversive, but more often it tends to distract
the viewer from the sexual and power relations it inscribes.
And finally, such pleasure is only intransitive, not effect-
ive -- i.e., it takes no object and is merely a condition of
being.

What Fiske is trying to describe for us, the doubleness
implicit in the use of a photographed "symbol" or videotape,
in which the literal force of the referent always pulls
dialectically against whatever meaning it is supposed to
have (a concept derived from Barthes), is a tension
performers and audiences uniquely understand. This
doubleness, which has always been part of and trouble in
language, which is the fundamental element of allegory --
this doubleness is performative, it is the both-and
"liminality," to use Turner's phrase broadly, one which

surfaces in performance. Just as we understand that an actor both is and is not the character he represents, we understand that a framed image or movement image, as Deleuze calls it in film, both is and is not the real.

Fiske's arguments have been an important turning point in media theory; they are particularly attractive to those who would not accept Adorno and Horkheimer's teleology for the culture industry, articulated in The Dialectic of Enlightenment or the postmodernist portraits of late capitalist culture sketched by Fredric Jameson (discussed next). But the concept of indeterminacy or "semantic promiscuity," as a preserve of critical space in an image-laden culture, remains mired in confusion. As Barry King argued,[64] the prevalent cultural studies concept of "semiotic democracy" synthesizes postmodernism's ideologically motivated "denial of a final meaning for images" with poststructuralism's notion of the infinitely receding signified in language.[65] This synthesis, as King said, ignores the fundamental difference between the linguistic and the visual signifier -- it denies, finally, the material presence of the referent in the visual sign, which limits semiosis and is part of its force. And indeed it is the "body," or the material presence of the image which has proved so difficult to theorize. As De Man would say, it is this area of "blindness" where we should seek

real insight into the problem of meaning in an image
culture.

3. Fredric Jameson and the Image

Fredric Jameson's theory of the postmodern suffers from
a similar paradox: in trying to find a way into the
postmodern image, Jameson is blocked by an inability to read
the historicity, materiality, and performativity of images.
In his book on postmodernism, Postmodernism, or, the
Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Fredric Jameson nominates
video (both commercial television and video art) as the
ultimate metaphor and vehicle for postmodern culture,

> the supreme and privileged, symptomatic, index of
> the zeitgeist... the cultural dominant of a new
> social and economic conjuncture... the richest
> allegorical and hermeneutic vehicle for some new
> description of the system itself.[66]

The vastness of the importance Jameson ascribes to video
here has its source in his conviction that all culture is
now connected to, or in the condition of, television --
postmodernism, late capitalism, and the media are all
interdependent faces of the same monolithic structure of
multinational late capitalism. In fact, he equates
postmodernism with video -- in the first chapter he says
postmodernism is not a style but a "cultural dominant," and
in his chapter on video he says that very "cultural

dominant" is video.

But this equation does not empower video as a rhetorical or aesthetic praxis, or situate it as the zone for any new critical space or consciousness -- quite the opposite. His reason for nominating a "cultural dominant," as he puts it in his title chapter, is to empower criticism. Uneasy with Williams' description of culture as a force field of "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production, Jameson argues that

> If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecideable.[67]

For video, the cultural dominant he chooses, to have any power as a praxis would require critical space which he can't see in the media. Taking the "blockage of fresh thinking" exhibited by a group of literary scholars at a conference on television in 1980 as a sign that "what used to be called 'critical distance' has become obsolete,"[68] Jameson has decided that media culture is the mortar sealing the previously essential gap between culture and the economy. If the "autonomous sphere of culture" is not entirely gone, it has expanded or exploded

> ...throughout the social realm, to the point at

> which everything in our social life -- from
> economic value and state power to practices and to
> the very structure of the psyche itself -- can be
> said to have become 'cultural' in some original
> and yet untheorized sense.[69]

All cultural production in late capitalism can do,
therefore, is to reflect this state of affairs. The
postmodern world is so determined by the dynamics of late
capitalism, that art can no longer help us get outside of
it.

> ...aesthetic production has become integrated into
> commodity production generally: the frantic
> economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever
> more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to
> airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now
> assigns an increasingly essential structural
> function and position to aesthetic innovation and
> experimentation.[70]

To Jameson, postmodernism and late capitalism and cultural
production are all part of the same totality, a massive and
complex structure which our minds can no longer grasp. Art
can no longer interrogate or comment on society because we
are incapable, he says, of mapping "the great global
multinational and decentered communicational network in
which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects."[71]

Jameson's description of the impotence of culture in late capitalism is more debilitating than Adorno and Horkheimer's in <u>The Dialectic of Enlightenment</u>. For the Frankfurt school, Jameson says, there was still space for the individual's movement of thought among the various elements of culture, and there was still a consciousness which could see art as an autonomous and critical realm (Adorno). At that time, Jameson suggests, art could still emerge between "the meaningless materiality of the body and nature and the meaning endowment of history and of the social."[72] Jameson argues that the very definition of postmodernism is that it has absorbed that gap, that zone of autonomy, in which modern art praxis used to operate. This depiction of the media, and its implications for independent video, despairs of the possibility that oppositional movmements thus gain real, physical access to the means of cultural production, and simultaneously gives up altogether on acknowledging the possibility of rhetorical or aesthetic intervention in the "culture industry."

Jameson's portrait of postmodern culture has been critiqued for its reimposition of a master narrative, for its apparent "reflection theory,"[73] but his argument that critical distance is a virtue lost to the postmodern world seems to be a matter of agreement -- most recently by Hal Foster, for instance.[74] This apparent consensus is a

postmodern one -- in a field of theory which 1) denies a
stable position to a reading subject and a coherent identity
to an author, 2) denies the coherence of the worlds engaged
by contemporary texts, and 3) devalues any position in which
a potential "critic" would situate herself, old-fashioned
"critical distance" has collapsed.

But Jameson is in conflict with himself -- he feels
that a radical cultural politics must revive "one of the
age-old functions of art -- the pedagogical and the
didactic."[75] He recognizes the need for the Left to
identify some "moment of truth," to take up, as Benjamin
bid, as Enzensberger insisted, the struggle over the
wavelengths. And yet he finds the material of that struggle
to be degraded.

> ...for political groups which seek actively to
> intervene in history... there cannot but be much
> that is deplorable and reprehensible in a cultural
> form of image addiction which, by transforming the
> past into visual mirages, stereotypes, or texts,
> effectively abolishes any practical sense of the
> future and of the collective project, thereby
> abandoning the thinking of future change to
> fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable
> cataclysm....[76]

Semiotic and psychoanalytically based media and

communications theory is powerless against this denial of
critical space, or of any dialectic in the images of
contemporary culture, as long as it reconceptualizes the
notion of "opposition" as merely resistant viewing. In its
various forms and concepts, the concept of resistant
reading, guaranteed as a possibility by the inherent
"semiotic democracy" of the televisual, according to media
and communications theory, has not taken advantage of its
own vision of the viewer as active, and has thus
unnecessarily affirmed "the way things are" in the media.
Meanwhile, the crucial property of "indeterminacy" in the
televisual text has remained an operationally and
aesthetically vague category, limited to demonstrations of
the number of ways certain formulaic television shows are
re-used by their audiences. While such reading practices
will undoubtedly eventually give way to increasingly
sophisticated categories and descriptions of the aesthetics
of television, and while television has become increasingly
decentered and polysemic, it will not lead to a program for
resistive or even active "reading" skills which would
empower viewers to critique or to answer to what they see on
television.

Of course, an optimistic description of the televisual
as a polysemic and/or semantically indeterminate force field
of endlessly proliferating meanings implicitly suggests that

theory need not concern itself with critical space -- it
already exists. If, as Fiske argues, communities determine
the meaning and the success of television texts by bringing
their own cultures, historical contexts, and languages to
the indeterminate moment, the ambiguously coded "strip of
reality" which constitutes most television experience, then
the final indeterminacy of the televisual text does in fact
provide a zone of interpretive freedom.

Nevertheless, Jameson's announcement of the loss of
critical distance in postmodern culture requires scrutiny,
insofar as his oversight is due to his participation in a
tradition which has sublimated the image to the plane of
language. Jameson overlooks, as I will argue in the
following pages before returning to his critique of video
art, the "performative turn" in postmodern cultural
practice. In the 1960s and 1970s, the period Jameson
himself identifies as that of postmodernism's first
flowering, was one in which performance, not television, was
considered the paradigmatic postmodern cultural form,
according to a number of cultural theorists[77] (including
the formalist modernist Michael Fried).[78] Artists in every
medium were turning to performance and intermediatic forms
of expression (and so, for that matter, were presidential
candidates). For those who wanted to make their art
practice participate in the social world, as Henry Sayre put

it recently, performance was best suited to the
"contingency, multiplicity, and polyvocality" of postmodern
culture.[79]

Of course, as Marjorie Perloff argued in a lecture in
the spring of 1992 in New York, those following Jameson have
edged away from precisely those performative "open forms"
and indeterminacies which were the initial spark of
postmodernism.[80] In the process, she argues, postmodernist
theory has become "prescriptive" rather than open-ended,
withdrawing from literal, material play with language and
with disciplinary boundaries and leaving us with concepts of
"play" and "performance" which are merely metaphorical --
that is, which trade on a fundamentally linguistic model of
the force of the image and of performance.

Michael Fried's famous critique of minimalism in Art
and Objecthood concretized at least one version of the
modern/postmodern divide: it noted the departure of
minimalism from the modernist goal of pure, disembodied
seeing,[81] toward "theatricality." In his later discussion
of that argument, Fried contextualizes his own comments of
1967 by saying "the attempt to defeat the theatrical was a
central impulse of a major tradition within French painting
between, say, Greuze and Manet."[82] Indeed, as W.J.T.
Mitchell's history of iconology and Naomi Schorr's history
of the detail in art help us see,[83] the material,

"referential weight" of the image has been excluded from culture since Plato. To quote from Mitchell: "The words we now translate as 'image' (the Hebrew tselem, the Greek eikon, and the Latin imago) are properly understood, as the commentators never tire of telling us, not as any material picture, but as an abstract, general, spiritual 'likeness.'"[84] Literature and philosophy have contributed to a progressive "sublimation of the image" -- from a concrete picture used for illustration, to the point where it is the central concern of poetry, so that an entire poem or text becomes a kind of visualizable or graphic or geometric structure. This progression has ultimately severed the image from reality so that word, idea, and image have tended to be linked differently -- "not as a movement from world to mind to language, but from one kind of sign to another."[85]

The revolution which began to identify pictures or "artificial forms" with images as "likenesses" was the invention of artificial perspective (systematized by Alberti in 1435). The scientific approach to representing the world became naturalized after that, laying the groundwork for the idea that the photograph or the film is a "natural" image. When photography, and the arts that followed, reintroduced the irrefutably specific material referent into the image once again, however, it seemed that reality and the image

had been collapsed together, and with them, meaning. Barthes first saw the photographic as a "message without a code"; Christian Metz has called film a "language without a system."[86] To the collapse of reality and image has been added, in the age of television, the collapse of time, in two senses: live television and video's unprecedented ability for simultaneous recording and playback has stunned us with what Barthes has called the meaninglessness of the trauma, while the unending, 24-hour and multi-channel television broadcast distorts our own lived time. Raymond Williams describes our apocryphal fear of this prolonged, meaningless "naturalism":

> Till the eyes tire, millions of us watch the shadows of shadows and find them substance; watch scenes, situations, actions, exchanges, crises. The slice of life, once a project of naturalist drama, is now a voluntary, habitual, internal rhythm; the flow of action and acting, of representation and performance, raised to a new convention, that of a basic need.[87]

Williams' foreboding description of our absorption in the image, as well as Jameson's speechlessness before it, have to do with a certain dread of the "meaningless materiality" of the world.

But the dominant tendency toward formalist abstraction

of seeing and writing was always shadowed by a counter-
history as well, a history of the contingent, of the
incidental, often the ornamental, which Naomi Schorr calls a
history of the detail. This history of the unmeasurable,
the ephemeral and the processual elements of mortality and
consciousness has always, from the margins of culture,
pulled against the credibility of a realism which yielded a
unified, sublimated image. With photography and the arts
that followed, the specific material referent entered into
the images considered part of culture, and the image finally
became more meaningful, more mysterious, and more
threatening.

In the face of this threat a new iconoclasm has
surfaced: poetry, after Imagism, turned away from the
image,[88] and Geoffrey Hartman has commented that the
iconoclasm which runs through the history of Western culture
has surfaced in the art since the 1960s as well -- that
"iconoclasm keeps creating new genres, images, even
monuments."[89] In his impressionistic article on the
fraught nature of contemporary conceptions of
representation, he argues that both the suspicion of
representation as false and the endorsement of it as an
aspect of "presence" (both the "anti-reps" and the "reps,"
as Hartman puts it) recognize "that the mind presses against
its own ability to fashion simulacra."[90]

Roland Barthes' response to photography (discussed further in chapter 3) illustrates this point by charting the destabilizing effect photography had on his own structuralist theories of the sign. In his discussions of the image Barthes gradually turns from semiology and his interest in the anchored and coded meanings in the image, and towards his later fascination with the "third" meaning he finds in Eisenstein stills: that indescribable, obtuse, personal force of a moment captured in a photograph, a force which felt too simple. "The Photograph... is... the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the This...."[91]. The problem and ultimately the "essence" of photography, he finds, is the inseparability of the image from its referent, like the windowpane from the view; "in short, the referent adheres."[92] The inseparability of the sign from the signifier, and the apparent lack of mediation by an idea in the recorded image, defeats the kind of meaning-making process we are used to. Technical, social, or historical explanations of the meaning of photography do not help -- to understand the meaning of the photographs he is looking at, Barthes finds himself "'scientifically' alone and disarmed,"[93] able to understand photography only through himself. The failure of structuralism, or any articulable logic, in the face of this mystery, is what Barthes was most fascinated with. It is

this failure that led to poststructuralism, and it is this
failure simultaneously which brought on the earlier
performative, contingent, and materialistic experiments of
postmodernist creativity in both theory and artistic praxis.

Barthes' engagement with photography is open-ended in
Camera Lucida, a narrative which has something ethnographic
about it -- it is full of a kind of self-revelation which
resonates with the language of performative self-
reflexivity. In describing his strong attraction for
certain photographs, Barthes says "...it animates me, and I
animate it."[94] He learns about his own strategies of
performing himself. When he poses, Barthes says, he feels
himself changing, as he struggles to transcend the reduction
of himself to an image. And his confession that his mind,
which is his self, cannot be represented, teaches us all
about our self-perception before the camera:

> ...since what I want to have captured is a
> delicate moral texture and not a mimicry, and
> since Photography is anything but subtle except in
> the hands of the very greatest portraitists, I
> don't know how to work upon my skin from within.
> I decide to 'let drift' over my lips and in my
> eyes a faint smile which I mean to be
> 'indefinable,' in which I might suggest, along
> with the qualities of my nature, my amused

> consciousness of the whole photographic
> ritual....if only Photography could give me a
> neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies
> nothing![95]

It is this very helplessness, this nakedness, before the image, so moving in Barthes, which makes Jameson uneasy, an uneasiness which characterizes Jameson's film and video readings. His collection of essays on film, Signatures of the Visible, begins with the sentence "The visual is essentially pornographic,"[96] a statement which reveals both his recognition of bodily presence in the image but also his fear of it. Unlike Barthes, who describes the meaning of a photograph as the punctum, the thing which "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me,"[97] Jameson finds himself unable to interact with the image -- he sees the material element of our attraction to image, inevitable as it is, to be prehistoric, uncultural, meaningless, untranformed. Note the imagery in the following:

> ...with the extinction of the sacred and the
> 'spiritual,' the deep underlying materiality of
> all things has finally risen dripping and
> convulsive into the light of day; and it is clear
> that culture itself is one of those things whose
> fundamental materiality is now for us not merely

evident but quite inescapable.[98]

The inescapability of the "materiality" of culture seems to be clearly identified with image -- both of which, as we have said, obliterate the gap between the material of culture and a transformative concept.

Paradoxically, Jameson's feeling that there is no critical space possible in the fundamental materiality of an image culture is based on the notion that the photographic, filmic, and video image are immaterial, and that therefore we have no access to its site of production. And when we cannot reconstruct "some initial situation out of which the finished work emerges," he says, any image will "remain an inert object, a reified end product impossible to grasp as a symbolic act in its own right, as praxis and production."[99] To illustrate this point, Jameson compares Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes with Andy Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes," his pre-eminent symbol of postmodern art (indeed, the cover image on his book).

This comparison, which attempts to contrast modernism and postmodernism through just two paintings, (Marjorie Perloff called this a "synechdocal fallacy" of postmodernism)[100] is chosen in order to engage Heidegger's discovery in the shoes a synechdoche of humanity, of their use value, of the whole world of work which emanate from the shoes for the attentive viewer.[101] Jameson's

interpretation of Heidegger's reading is that such a work of art "emerges in the gap between Earth and World, or what I would prefer to translate as the meaningless materiality of the body and nature and the meaning endowment of history and of the social."[102] And the element of the painting which mediates that gap (which Jameson argues that Heidegger leaves out) is

> the renewed materiality of the work,... the transformation of one form of materiality -- the earth itself and its paths and physical objects -- into that other materiality of oil paint affirmed and foregrounded in its own right and for its own visual pleasures....[103]

Jameson's reading suggests that it is the painting itself which enables this hermeneutic activity -- he argues that Van Gogh's painting, in its own presence, bespeaks "...the whole abject world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil, a world reduced to its most brutal and menaced, primitive and marginalized state."[104] Van Gogh's painting, he feels, transforms that world with its "hallucinatory surface of color," a gesture he sees as "Utopian," "an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new Utopian realm of the senses, or at least of that supreme sense -- sight, the visual, the eye -- which it now

reconstitutes for us as a semiautonomous space in its own right."[105]

But this interpretive process, he claims, which discovers in the inert object some "vaster reality," is not possible in a painting like Andy Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes." While the peasant shoes evoke the whole world they represent (the fields, the earth, the cold), Andy Warhol's shoes are merely

> a random collection of dead objects hanging together on the canvas like so many turnips, as shorn of their earlier life world as the pile of shoes left over from Auschwitz or the remainders and tokens of some incomprehensible and tragic fire in a packed dance hall.[106]

The disengaged series of metaphors in Jameson's reading more reflects his depression over the cultural productions of the postmodern than any real quality of the painting, which explains his feeling that it is impossible to "complete the hermeneutic gesture and restore to these oddments that whole larger lived context of the dance hall or the ball, the world of jetset fashion or glamour magazines."[107] Instead of suspending his apocalyptic opinion and carefully considering the image, Jameson reads his sense of history into the image -- to him it represents death without the sense of death, and it is the use of photography which

instills a deathly quality in "Diamond Dust Shoes,"
"...whose glacéd X-ray elegance mortifies the reified eye of
the viewer in a way that would seem to have nothing to do
with death or the death obsession or the death anxiety on
the level of content."[108]

Despite Jameson's pessimism, it is possible to see
other meanings here -- the painting could be an allegory for
fashion and social culture, perhaps even a feminist
allegory. The different shoes, thrown together like this,
evoke a fifties feminine culture, representing the mass
marketing of "individuality" in women's fashion and beauty,
something which is a lived experience for women. And
whether or not the shoes have been worn, the closeup draws
attention to the shape of the feet that might be dressed or
deformed by them. The image is suggestive, whatever its
intention or its cynicism about commodity culture, of a
dialectical interplay between fashion and personal style,
clothing and self, the individual and the conventional which
resonates with all of mass culture. We know the image is
playing on that new and unique paradox that popular culture
literally banks on: that millions have the same things you
have, but your _relationship_ to them, to certain popular
songs, certain kinds of jeans, certain shoes, is unique. In
that world the distinction between the trivial and the
symbolic is up for grabs, and the tension between the two

lies in both the object and in the viewer.

Such a tension is, I think, part of the genius of pop art, and it will always elude any circumscribing logic. It is a tension the viewer, provoked by the postmodernist blurring of boundaries between "art" and "life," carries with her into the world. Potentially, it models a regenerative kind of awareness to the world outside of art, the everyday mysteries and beauties of objects and behaviors which, if you consider them long enough, eventually speak. This was what Benjamin was convinced of in his Passagen-Werk or arcades project -- he was convinced that "the ephemeral quality of the world [including the world of the mass commodity] is charged with meaning," and so he wanted to "take materialism so seriously that the historical phenomena (of mass culture) themselves were brought to speech."[109] In fact, like Heidegger, Benjamin wanted to bridge the gap between everyday experience and traditional academic concerns, "...actually to achieve that phenomenological hermeneutics of the profane world which Heidegger only pretended."[110]

But Warhol's print might also be about the gap that remains between our new capacity for instantaneous perception and representation in the photograph. Though the gap between the signifier and the signified is apparently collapsed, a mystery remains in the incidental images we

fixate upon without thinking. The print of the dancing

shoes requires, in any case, a new kind of perception

mediating that gap. The luminesence of the solarized image

of dancing shoes and the glamour brilliantly apocalypsed by

the silvery sheen, are deliberate and palpable mediations of

that gap -- suggestive not just of photographic processes

(in which solarization and silver are basic) but of the

translation of the everyday world into visual data, and the

changing relationship between self and image which we

ourselves experience, as Barthes did, before the camera.

The print displays its own process: someone (presumably

Warhol) got up close to this scene and took this picture,

for some reason. Through the process of solarizing it, thus

sharpening and emphasizing the contours of light and dark,

and transferring these sharper data of perception to

silkscreen, then playing with new colors for the shoes, the

artist offers up the familiar in a new, estranged form,

demanding through the use of art materials that we look at

this magnified, colorized, exaggerated record of a mere

glimpse. And the longer we look, the more these shoes come

to represent something akin to what Benjamin calls a

"dialectical image."[111] In this fragment of the

commodified and mass produced world lies an axis of a

specific, historical relationship between individual, social

world, economy, and culture -- an ambivalent image of the

what Adorno called "the perennial protestation of the
particular against the general," in which it is not at all
clear whether "the latter remains irreconcilable with the
particular";[112] that conclusion is left up to us.

4. Fredric Jameson and Video Art

Jameson is one of the few, perhaps the only, major
Marxist cultural theorists to consider the potential
relationship between the praxis of experimental video and
culture. And yet Jameson distances himself from the problem
of studying the materiality of video by looking at
experimental video deductively, as part of the "logic" of
television, rather than inductively, as a mode of image-
making which has its own mysteries. Part of the reason is
that he tries to avoid a modernist language for approaching
a new form and reading any essential formal elements into
it, but he is also interested in placing experimental video
within the larger cultural sphere of television. He
explains that experimental video, irrelevant though it may
be in itself, might help us to understand television better:

> This is less a matter of mass versus elite culture
> than it is of controlled laboratory situations:
> what is so highly specialized as to seem aberrant
> and uncharacteristic in the world of daily life --
> hermetic poetry, for example, can often yield

crucial information about the properties of an
object of study... whose familiar everyday forms
obscure it. Released from all conventional
constraints, experimental video allows us to
witness the full range of possibilities and
potentialities of the medium in a way which
illuminates its various more restricted uses, the
latter being subsets and special cases of the
former.[113]

In this passage we see Jameson's contradictory impulses: his
laboratory image reveals that he will end up seeing
experimental video art as part of the totality of postmodern
culture, mere samples of television tissue to be examined
under a microscope in the lab, but he also describes
experimental video as if it did occupy the privileged
critical space that modern art once occupied and which
enabled it to interrogate and not merely to reflect the
culture.

He goes on to suggest that experimental video must be
positioned dialectically against the phenomenon of
television, for a number of reasons. He sees in it "...a
flowering and a multiplicity of new forms and visual
languages,"[114] the possibility of a unique materiality in
video, made up of a new relationship between space and
time,[115] a new positioning of the subject, and a new

freedom from the "rhetoric of consciousness and experience" which release us "to confront this seemingly subjective temporality in a new and materialist way, a way which constitutes a new kind of materialism as well, one not of matter but of machinery."[116] The machinery of video, however, yields a different materiality "than a static or mechanical materialism of matter or materiality itself as some inert support"[117] (by which he clearly means the automatism of photography and film): because of its genetic connection to animation, it is closer to the "active materialism" of writing and drawing, which must be "completed by the omnipotent force of human praxis itself."[118]

Despite the vision of experimental video as the possible site for the intervention of human praxis in television which surfaces occasionally in Jameson's text, he is nevertheless more concerned with the "machine itself," whose emergence "deconcealed in some unexpected way the produced materiality of human life and time."[119] His rigid postmodernism forces him to fold any moment of such praxis back into the "total flow" of texts by which he has thus far identified postmodernism, because, he says, in the context of the postmodern, it is "quite out of the question... to look at a single 'video work' all by itself.... The 'interesting' text now has to stand out of an

undifferentiated and random flow of other texts."[120]

As his main exhibit, Jameson chooses an experimental video piece which seems, on one level, to best support this pre-imposed cultural logic of television. "AlienNATION" (1979), by Edward Rankus, John Manning, and Barbara Latham, by multiple authors, imitates and exceeds the "total flow" of the televisual with an uncataloguable variety and number of images moving at an unmanageable speed (I quote Jameson's admirable list in chapter three on pages 141-142). It is a fortunate choice for Jameson, since it seems to bear out his thesis about the absence of critical distance in television, revised in this later chapter -- that television's total flow disables memory and thus critical distance. Indeed, "AlienNATION" is hard to know as a whole, because its text deliberately surpasses the limits of our capacity to retain, synthesize, and structure what we are seeing. Jameson argues that as a result, no one image or moment is permitted to become memorable or meaningful -- no sign is permitted to become the "interpretant," as Peirce would have called it. The viewer tries in vain to construct moments of meaning, connections between one kind of narrative and another, but these don't hold -- as Jameson puts it, any image held long enough to allow a theme to develop around it, and he notices several, is a flaw, an obstacle, which "quickly spreads out over the sequence like a burn spot on the film, at that

point 'held' long enough to generate and emit a thematic message quite inconsistent with the textual logic of the thing itself."[121]

Jameson's reading, clearly the result of multiple viewings and a substantial effort to translate what he was seeing into a kind of cognitive map,[122] has its value and place. But what if we were to accept the tape not as a structured text but as a performance, or a "situation," which leaves us with an experience? As Henry Sayre says of a David Antin talk poem, whose movement leaves the text undecideable, we are confronted in this text with a "'figure of mind' that is dialectical -- or dialogical."[123]

One such experience of the tape (my own, before reading Jameson's analysis) left a few salient images in my mind which I understood to be contingent to my own experience and unequal to the mass of images in the tape, but to which I nevertheless ascribed significance: the first part of the tape seemed to be sounds and images from the 1950s -- science films -- and the 1960s (the text of <u>Being and Time</u>), the manic attempts of our culture to map, measure, and represent Being. Out of the too many disparate kinds of images of technological manipulations, one image in particular resonated: that of a mouse struggling across a ruler being held aloft by a hand, clinging with its tail. The hand holding the ruler signified, to me at least, the

relativity of measurement, the arbitrary and human nature of technology against the arbitary and animal nature of life. And although the ability to maintain that concept seemed to implode in the "rush" of images Jameson describes, it suggested something about the rest of the images.

The problem with Jameson's analysis is that, despite the acuity of his many observations of the tape, and of his own experience in watching it (he describes his boredom, his feeling of being strapped to the chair, his thoughts about video's particular revelation of the nature of time, his efforts to construct a narrative shape for the thing) he ultimately shrugs that experience off in his effort to crystallize its structure. And he concludes that "the postmodernist text -- of which we have taken the videotape in question to be an exemplar -- is from that perspective defined as a structure or sign flow which resists meaning, whose fundamental inner logic is the exclusion of the emergence of themes as such...."[124]

It seems quite clear that the "fundamental inner logic" of the tape is deliberately and insistently decentered, but the question whether such decentering of "logic" excludes or stimulates the emergence of meanings (in Jameson's view, the fate of the postmodern image culture), is the question of the next two chapters. In these I attempt to reconstrue the "indeterminacy" of the video image as the opportunity for a

new, processual and experiential concept of "meaning." From
the point of view of experience, the flip side of Jameson's
reading is equally possible -- that such a videotext keeps
producing meanings, that its fundamental inner logic is the
creation of themes. For now, however, it can be pointed out
that the hyperbolic tension "AlienNATION" highlights in our
experience of an accelerated flow of disparate images, many
of which are clearly distinguishable from the empty staged
montages of television promotional style, is clearly
rhetorical. The tension is based on the fact that we are
seeing three-dimensional situations almost made into logos -
- we see "movement-images" as stills because they are moving
so fast. Each fragment, because it is a "movement-image"
(Deleuze's term) rather than a still image, carries a
semantic and referential weight that it cannot shed, and
thus has a different relationship to montage than the
photograph. Each movement-image is heavily saturated with
such divergent connotations that the images will not cohere
but are rather pulled apart semantically. This draws us in
as viewers, as does our uncertainty as to how we are being
addressed. We are aware that each image in this montage has
been extricated from a different moment in history. By
denying us the time to recognize or settle on any one
narrative, the tape reveals to us that what the pace and
variety of television denies us is the time to reconstruct

that situation of seeing or recording that each fragment represents. Thus the tape exposes the difference between Jameson's notion of a visual "text," a term which implies structure, stasis, and an "inner logic," and another kind of text, the text of experience, uniquely stimulated by the visual and particularly the movement-image. The tension in this tape between the text and its "delivery" (which in this case is clearly parodic) is a performative tension.

The Fiskean concept of "resistant" viewing carries the trace of this understanding: that seeing is active and selective, that the social and material excess of the visual image often destabilizes whatever ideology it is trying to impart. This argument often celebrates 1) Bakhtin's description of the progressive potential latent in the "centrifugal" tendencies of language, and 2) Barthes' and Benjamin's articulation of the ways in which mass cultural images resist traditional cultural codes. In the next chapter we will reevaluate what Benjamin, Bakhtin, and Barthes had to say about the indeterminacy of the photographic or mass cultural image in order to uncover their emphasis on seeing as the site of social change. My argument is that a revaluation of active, interpretive seeing, combined with a socio-historical consciousness of the materiality and performativity of the image, is something that experimental video kindles.

III. Indeterminacy and Materiality of the Image

In chapter one we described the influence of Cage's aesthetics of chance and indeterminacy on artists' experimentation in the video medium and posed the question: would the "logic" of television, as described by Jameson, absorb it, or might the material specificity of voice and subjectivity which video artists have continued to inscribe in the medium have the potential to intervene in, transform, or transcend televisual discourse?

The answer seems to hinge on the notion of "indeterminacy." In the 1960s and 1970s, the term meant an open-ended and performative play with the meanings, conventions, and materials of art, and now it has become synonymous with the depthlessness and chaos of postmodern culture. The term "indeterminacy," in the context of contemporary language and art theory is distinctly different from the old Empsonian "ambiguity" -- a certain attractive mystery and inscrutability that provides more than one possible meaning to a text. Now the concept of indeterminacy connotes something both more real and more dynamic -- the term suggests some kind of historical and scientific limit to human intelligence or measurement, as it introduces something dynamic to the concept of meaning.

Poststructuralism has provided language theory and philosophy with this principle as Heisenberg has provided physics with his revolutionary principle of quantum mechanics: that the accurate measurement of one of two related, observable quantities, as position and momentum or energy and time, produces uncertainties in the measurement of the other.

The recognition of indeterminacy at the heart of language and "truth" has decentered certain habits of modernism, including the binarism of semantics, and the binarism of subversion, and replaced them with a focus on a movement away from, or outside of, the systems which generate those oppositions. What is neglected in this move, however, is a productive understanding of the very element of language and representation which destabilizes meaning: the materiality of the signifier. In this chapter we will move from the kind of textual analysis of "indeterminacy" in postmodern art and poetry (Marjorie Perloff and Henry Sayre) to Deleuze's more general association of "indeterminacy" with processual thinking, and finally to a re-reading of the work of Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes, whose theories of meaning and seeing extract, from the opportunities presented by new cultural forms, a vital and productive way of seeing which attempts to validate, without sublimating or systematizing, the life and the

social meaning of the particular. It is this way of seeing
that experimental video both exemplifies and demands.

1.Marjorie Perloff and Textual Indeterminacy

Marjorie Perloff represents a textual criticism which
has championed the "poetics of indeterminacy" in the
postmodern art practice of the 1960s and 1970s. Her
approach, however, has thematized the textual effect of
indeterminacy as "undecideability," a thematization that
makes the performative dynamic of "indeterminacy" stand
still. Perloff's concept of indeterminacy in The Poetics of
Indeterminacy is interdisciplinary and intergeneric -- her
work can be seen as an effort to continually broaden and
renew our definitions of poesis. Within poetry, then, she
defines the movement toward "indeterminacy" as the movement,
within modernist art and literature, away from the semantic
unities of "High Modernism," represented by Baudelaire and
Mallarmé and their Symbolist heirs, toward the surface from
depth and toward "process" from "structure."[1] The first
"poet of indeterminacy," she argues, was Rimbaud, whose
"dream landscapes" in Illuminations, "at once present and
absent, concrete and abstract, are composed of particulars
that cannot be specified, of images that refuse to cohere in
a consistent referential scheme."[2] In the poetry of

indeterminacy in general, then:

> the symbolic evocations generated by words on the
> page are no longer grounded in a coherent
> discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide
> which of these associations are relevant and which
> are not.[3]

Having made that argument, Perloff goes on to a series of
close readings, informed by her own grounding in New
Critical reading strategies, of the poetry of Rimbaud,
Pound, Stein, Williams, Beckett, and John Cage, in which she
consistently finds the tendencies away from "meaning" and
toward the materiality of words or images.

But the valence of that "materiality," and its
relationship to "indeterminacy," varies greatly within the
poets she describes, and Perloff does not work out a
distinction, in this book, among kinds of materiality. Thus
she is able to argue that Rimbaud's dreamscapes have no
referent -- they are, rather, phantasmagorias of synecdoche,
hallucinogenic play with images -- but because of the simple
principle that his words "shed their natural and
conventional associations,"[4] Perloff is confident of
arguing that Rimbaud's poetry "anticipates both Cubist and
Surrealist art in his deliberate scrambling of cues"[5]
without considering the radical difference between Cubist
and Surrealist "scrambling of cues." Indeed, as E.H.

Gombrich (whom Perloff herself relies on in this instance) says, "Cubism... is the most radical attempt to stamp out ambiguity and enforce one reading of the picture -- that of a man-made construction, a colored canvas."[6]

Perloff does not discuss the contradictory vagaries, mystical and materialistic, of the literal image. She explores them as they appear in the texts she considers, continually defending difficult texts against charges of "abstraction" and continually drawing the conclusion that the meanings are undecidable. In this vacillation there surfaces an appreciation for the fragments of reference that make up what she considers "indeterminacy" in poetry, but her theory is ad hoc. Having associated Rimbaud's dreamscapes (which defy reference to reality) with Cubism, she later contradicts herself in defending Gertrude Stein's "cubist" portrait poems against abstraction and argues that Cubism "always has an ultimate reference to external reality."[7] She goes on to note restlessly the other material dimensions of the word Stein engages. In "Susie Asado," for instance, she notes the dance of sound ("Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea,") and Stein's puns ("Susie Asado" may mean "roasted Susie," "silver seller" may be a pun on "silver cellar"), drawing sketchy maps of their possible referents, only to be stumped: "What is 'a said of jelly?' A 'told tray sure'?"[8] The undecidability of those

phrases, whatever their evocative power in the poem, is for
Perloff the whole point:

> These are the questions Gertrude Stein would want
> us to ask. For her verbal configurations are set
> up precisely to manifest the arbitrariness of
> discourse, the impossibility of arriving at 'the
> meaning' even as countless possible meanings
> present themselves to our attention.[9]

Considering the range of media Perloff incorporates into her
analysis of indeterminacy in poiesis, her constant return to
pure semantics is frustrating. Stein's combination of aural
and visual images might have been analyzed more
synthetically.[10] But in that book, Perloff's interest in
the move toward the surface still counts on the photographic
image as a metaphor, not an actual model, of the literal and
the contingent.

In a more recent book, Radical Artifice, Perloff moves
beyond this assiduous documentation of undecidability in
contemporary poetry and toward a broader theory of the
"paradigm shift" in poetry's use of image. Her ambitious
project is to determine the impact of media culture on the
poetic image by reading contemporary poetry against "modern"
poetry, and her argument is that contemporary poetry has
retreated from the representations of the "natural;" from
natural speech:

> Indeed, what Eliot called 'the ordinary everyday
> language which we use and hear has now entered an
> arena where 'natural talk,' filtered through the
> electronic media, packaged and processed, become
> the TV 'talk show," talk show being an apt name
> for the transformation of speech into
> spectacle.[11]

But again, Perloff interprets this movement or shift from
within poetry. Contemporary poets are retreating from the
image, and Perloff names three main manifestations of that
process: 1) Some poets are foregrounding but bracketing the
image. 2) Others are replacing the image with the word as
image, playing with the morphology and the visualization of
the word's constituent parts. 3) Finally, some poets are
focusing on syntax instead of image: "'Making strange' now
occurs at the level of phrasal and sentence structure rather
than at the level of the image cluster so that poetic
language cannot be absorbed into the discourse of the
media."[12]

2. Henry Sayre and Indeterminacy

Clearly influenced by Perloff, Henry Sayre also chooses
the Derridean term "undecidability" to describe the period
of cultural production Perloff addresses in Radical

<u>Artifice</u>. In Sayre's book, however, the term is broadened
to include the performative and visual arts on their own
terms, so his use of "undecidability" is more situational
and dramatic:

>...[undecideability describes] the condition of
>contingency, multiplicity, and polyvocality which
>dominates postmodern scene...the condition of
>conflict and contradiction which presents no
>possible 'solution' or resolution.[13]

At this level of generalization, Sayre prefers the term
undecideability to "indeterminacy," he says, because he
feels it "...locate[s] the question of the work's
contingency, multiplicity, and polyvocality in the audience
rather than in the work itself."[14] Sayre thus separates
out an important element of the contingencies of
postmodernism: what distinguishes it has been a sincere and
prolonged effort to incorporate the audience into the
mysterious project of making meaning. This distinction is
important: it distinguishes the project of responding to a
text from the project of theorizing its making -- it is not
"indeterminacy" which is the end-product of all
postmodernist texts. The postmodernist relinquishment of
authority in cultural practice, in the turn toward the
vernacular fragment, was more often intended to foreground
the viewer's own activity of perception, and to place the

artist and the viewer on the same side of seeing.

The greater range of coordinates in Sayre's study of
the turn toward indeterminacy -- photography, painting,
dance, performance, film, and video, to name a few --
generates a more complex distinction between
"undecideability" and "indeterminacy" in his readings of
texts. An example is his distinction between the work of
two painters: David Salle and Eric Fischl. Salle's
paintings, such as "His Brain" (1984) tend toward
intertexuality, setting a mixture of images in relation to
each other. Superimposed over a close-up of a figure of a
nude woman from behind are images on different planes of
different registers: a faint outline of a woman's face and
arm and what looks like a fishing boat are floating in front
of the picture, and on the side, positioned as a kind of
side-bar running the length of the painting, is a graphic,
perhaps a found graphic, of a regular pattern of blades
serving as a background for a long, smudgy, rod-shaped
thing. For Sayre the images in this painting, personal to
Salle, interact with each other on the picture plane but do
not extend to the viewer anything other than an awareness of
their interaction. The images, rather, cancel each other,
and leave the painting closed. The relationship among the
images and with the audience, therefore, is "assimilative."

Eric Fischl's paintings, on the other hand, which draw

more consciously on a "suburban vernacular," as Sayre puts it, in creating familiar but disturbing scenes, are more oriented toward using the canvas as a stage for the presentation of the familiar, which he hopes will affect the viewer as a reality and not as a painting. In what Fischl says below, it is clear that his model is the snapshot or the photograph:

> I want people to feel they're present at a scene they shouldn't be at, and don't want to be at. This is something that can't be created by painting, however basic. The scene has to be taken in very fast and left as quickly, and then slowly digested. If people have to start examining this or ℒhat detail, they miss the full point of the picture, which is that they're a kind of accomplice in it, an unwilling witness to the event. I want them to think about that, not just how the painting is made.[15]

The effect of Fischl's paintings, Sayre concludes, tends toward the disseminative, rather than the assimilative, as it is deliberately opened out onto the audience's experience. Sayre argues that the difference between these two effects, the disseminative and the assimilative, corresponds to the difference between undecideability and indeterminacy:

The undecidable is a function of the audience --
the myriad responses the audience is capable of
recognizing as the potentialities of the work --
where the indeterminate is a function of the work
itself, its internal contradictions and
ambiguities.[16]

Sayre's distinction between the assimilative and the
disseminative seems to protest any programmatic association
of collage with the disseminative.[17] In fact Sayre does
object to the rhetorical structure of "opposition"
associated with collage, arguing that the division between
high art and low art which it presumed has collapsed -- that
collage is able to "collapse aesthetic difference."[18] (It
is notable here that Sayre describes the logic of television
as "collage."[19]) Sayre distinguishes such collage from
intertextual compositions, such as Laurie Anderson's and
John Cage's, which are explorative and playful rather than
grounded in an organizing consciousness -- in which "image,
word, and music impinge upon one another -- draw each other
out, so to speak."[20] What creates this interplay, Sayre
says, is the "lack of an organizing consciousness," a kind
of "nomad thought," a drift between moments of
"intensity."[21] What he does not explicitly say is that the
power of the ellipses and gaps in both Anderson's and Cage's
compositions has to do with their mobilization in

performance.

Sayre does not really need to say so, since he implies
this throughout his book, that the performative is the
dominant mode of the postmodern. However, his concept of
"nomad thought" comes from Gilles Deleuze who describes a
more general kind of thinking provoked by indeterminacy. It
is the slide between the aesthetic <u>use</u> of indeterminacy and
the more general social <u>effect</u> of indeterminacy which is at
the heart of the problematic we encountered in chapter two.

3. Gilles Deleuze and Nomad Thought

Deleuze's concept of "nomad thought" implies a sense of
movement. In his essay on Nietzsche Deleuze argues that if
Marx and Freud represent the dawn of modern culture, then
Nietzsche represents the dawn of counterculture; while Marx
and Freud tried to reorder or "recodify" the modern world,
Nietzsche's philosophy, and particularly his aphoristic
writing, manifest a wish to get "elsewhere: beyond all the
codes of past, present, and future, to transmit something
that does not and will not allow itself to be codified."[22]

Deleuze goes on to describe the dynamics of the
aphoristic or the indeterminate,[23] which evade the logics
of system, law, contract, or institution, as a kind of
journey into the real world. Engagement with the aphorism,

he says, requires an abandonment of foundations, a kind of "nomadic thought" which has, we might say, a paratactic (added on) relationship to previous thought rather than a syntactic one (incorporated into the system). Deleuze describes the mental movement required by the aphorism in terms of a journey: "The only conceivable key, perhaps, would be in the concept of 'embarkation.'"[24] The experience of Nietzsche's books is, he says, an experience of "drifting, of 'deterritorialization.'"[25] Abandoning the inner essence or concept which has always guided philosophy, Nietzsche "...grounds his thought, his writing, on an immediate relation with the outside, the exterior."[26]

What Deleuze means by exteriority is not a static or structural relationship to the outside, but a process or an experience. The aphorism is not, therefore, in opposition to philosophy as such but is rather in motion:

> ...a dynamic flux that carries us away even further outside. This is precisely a process of intensity, of intensities. The state of experience is not subjective in origin, at least not inevitably so. Moreover, it is not individual. It is a continuous flux and the disruption of flux, and each pulsational intensity necessarily bears a relation to another intensity, a point of contact and transmission. This is what

> underlies all codes, what escapes all codes, and
> it is what the codes themselves seek to translate,
> to convert, and mint anew.[27]

Like Bakhtin's notion of the prismatic ray word (discussed
further below), Deleuze's concept of the "dynamic flux"
generated by the word's journey away from fixed structures
of meaning is about the transformative potential latent in
the indeterminacy of language. Or, to put it in terms of
our previous and ensuing discussion, Deleuze is suggesting
that individual expression, in its encounter with the
"outside," with the polyphony and the "flux" of the real
world, is transformed.

This notion of deterritorialization is an apt metaphor
for the tendency of postmodern art practice toward
experimentation and experience, if we make use of Victor
Turner's etymological link between experiment, experience,
and journey.[28] But Deleuze is talking about the
relationship of aphorisms to philosophy. Such a situating
of representational and semantic play within a specific form
or genre of writing or representation raises an important
issue. Barthes, Benjamin and Bakhtin similarly valorized
photography, film, and the novel, and this tendency warrants
scrutiny given the history of technological determinism and
pessimism exemplified by Jameson and the Frankfurt School.
Postmodernism would seem to eschew generic boundaries,[29]

but genericity continually resurfaces. New genres or styles

of cultural production continue to be metaphors for gaps in

the cultural system, gaps which yield to the vitality of the

social world.

Among the new forms and media of the 20th century, the

photographic has constituted the central metaphor for the

emergence of the exterior and the concrete into social and

cultural discourse. And as an apparently "natural" form of

representation, a "message without a code," as Barthes once

described it,[30] a medium apparently identical to the object

itself, photography has seemed to be meaningless, in the

conventional sense. As Roland Barthes put it in "The

Reality Effect,"

> Unvarnished 'representation' of 'reality,' a naked
>
> account of 'what is' (or was), thus looks like a
>
> resistance to meaning, a resistance which confirms
>
> the great mythical opposition between the true-to-
>
> life (the living) and the intelligible.[31]

By a connected logic, the televisual has constituted the

central metaphor for the collapse of the distinction between

image and reality, for the dissolution of history, and for

the depthlessness of contemporary culture which is

associated with indeterminacy.[32] It is for this reason

that Jameson cannot separate the engagement of indeterminacy

in experimental video from the postmodern condition of

televisual indeterminacy he is commenting on -- as we have
seen, his analysis of video is less concerned with the
traces of praxis in the televisual and their destabilizing
effects on its narrative than he is with the way in which
the televisual machine continually defeats such praxis.

A theory of indeterminacy loosened from genre or
representational form, on the other hand, runs the risk of
overlooking the social and cultural conditions which produce
it. Writing about the avant-garde's engagement of the
literal or the found object Jean-François Lyotard sublimates
the avant-garde's engagement of the "indeterminate" to a
fundamental recognition that "there is indeterminacy" in the
relationship between the imagination and representation,
which, he points out, is not new -- it has always been the
source of the "sublime," ever since Longinus was unable to
define precisely what rhetorical strategies produced it.[33]
The avant-garde artist continues, like the romantic artist,
to attempt to "[bear] pictorial or otherwise expressive
witness to the inexpressible," which no longer resides

> ...in an over there, in another world, or another
> time, but in this: in that (something) happens.
> In the determination of pictorial art, the
> indeterminate, the 'it happens' is the paint, the
> picture. The paint, the picture as occurrence or
> event, is not expressible, and it is to this that

it has to bear witness.[34]

Like Burke, Lyotard stresses the importance of the "rugged" and the "broken" for the "sublime," which has always been the zone of indeterminate play, the dimension of art which acknowledges that it is impossible to legislate, through techne, all that the human mind can imagine. This impossibility, he says, is the source of a painful pleasure, a tension (which implies a dialectic), or, as Kant would have it, an "agitation" (the effort of the judgement to determine something that has yet to be determined). This frisson, moreover, is expressly distinct from mere technical accomplishment or mere perfection, the "calm of beauty." In fact, Lyotard tells us, "Longinus even goes so far as to propose inversions of reputedly natural and rational syntax as examples of sublime effect,"[35] thus suggesting to us that the technique of the sublime has always been a kind of modernist or conceptualist "purposeless play."

Lyotard's argument means not to reinstate the sublime, but to destabilize it in order to recover its dialectical nature (or perhaps to redefine it as dialectical), while arguing that dialectic no longer needs to be conceived as one requiring a separation between "art" and social life. And yet, as Naomi Schorr points out in her study of the detail, a Burkean circumscription of the contingent by the idealist structure of the sublime defeats the life of the

detail itself:

> ...to value the sublimities of the rugged and/or the small is not to valorize the detail, whose distinctive feature from the perspective of the sublime is not its wondrous 'minuteness,' but rather its uncanny tendency to introduce eye-catching differences within the mind-expanding spectacle of perfect uniformity and proportion.[36]

Here Schorr touches on the central problematic of a visual culture, one which postmodern theory retreats from. It is also the problematic of much experimental video, which is often more concerned with the life of the detail than any overriding idea.

In fact, it might be said that video art gives life to the detail. The "indeterminacy" of the video image is sometimes intentional, engaged, like the method of "chance" used in the neo-Dada art with which experimental video was linked, as a method of shifting the field of interpretation from the "artist" to the viewer and engaging a new kind of attention. Often, however, the artists exploring the potential of the video image did not know what they were looking for; rather they were simply hoping to see better -- Bruce Nauman said of taking up film "I wanted to find out what I would look at in a strange situation and I decided that with film and a camera I could do that."[37]

Benjamin, Barthes, and Bakhtin have all offered new ways of seeing the materiality of the signifier as progressive and vital, rather than chaotic and meaningless. Their various versions of the unique capacity of the new media of language and image to pry open the vault of culture and let in the voices and the images of real, everyday, lived life and language are balanced by a faith in hermeneutic activity as crucial rather than futile. Though they attempted to re-orient that hermeneutic away from the idealist and closed system of symbol, and toward a decentralized cultural practice, all three offer a new hermeneutic based on the experience of seeing, a seeing which could learn to recognize the notion of the socially charged meaning of the natural image. In the following sections I discuss their approaches to the "experience of seeing" in mass culture.

4. Walter Benjamin and Dialectical Seeing

For Walter Benjamin's greatest contribution to a theory of dialectical seeing in mass culture, we must work past what he argues about mass culture itself towards an understanding of the way he himself responded to it. His most famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," is a fragile set of theses,[38] about the

changing relationship of art and society in the age of
photography and film, but it has come to stand for a certain
hope for the media and a certain awareness of the way human
perception changes over time. Its most remembered argument
is that the mechanical reproducibility of art, which
deprives art of its "aura," its "presence in time and
space," accordingly destabilizes the old dynamic between
original and copy. Before technical reproducibility, manual
reproductions still evoked or submitted to the
"authenticity" of the original, whereas in photographic
reproduction, authenticity is no longer relevant. Thus the
techniques of reproduction invoke a whole new, democratic
order of cultural production which is sundered, and thus
liberated, from the tradition of the unique art object.
Because this thesis has been interpreted as a revolution
which depends on an ontological description of photography
and film technology, this concept of Benjamin's in a sense
inaugurated a meditation on the "ontology" of the media
which, as Turim noted, persists, and which reaches a drastic
end in Jameson's positioning of video as the imprisoning
paradigm of the postmodern.[39]

But an examination of the article reveals that the two
elements of the media with which Benjamin supports his
theory tend to pull in different directions over time, and
leave the contemporary reader with more questions about the

usefulness of Benjamin's insights for a contemporary theory of the media.[40] The first element concerns the film's impact on the creative process: the photograph and the film can bring out those aspects of the original which are unattainable to the naked eye, by using enlargement or slow motion to capture images which escape natural vision.[41] The second element concerns the film's impact on the "masses": reproductions are seen in contexts which may have nothing to do with the original, thus detaching the reproduced object from the domain of tradition and delivering it into contexts over which tradition has no control -- both a crisis and a chance of renewal.[42]

The first element, clearly inspired by Brecht,[43] imagines the possibility of allying technology, which lends a greater scientific accuracy to perception, to progressive culture in the form of art. While the painter belongs to the older domain of myth and magic (the painter, he argues, is like the "magician," in that he maintains a "natural distance between the patient and himself"), the filmmaker is comparable to a surgeon, who "greatly diminishes [it] by penetrating into the patient's body."[44] Analogously, he says, "the painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web."[45] Thus the cameraman and the painter obtain very different aspects of reality: "that of the painter is a

total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law."[46] And that new law, Benjamin concludes, is the more significant for contemporary man because it offers, "precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment."[47]

In this argument too there are two divergent thoughts, both of which are highly conditional. The first is that the technological art, by penetrating the "distance" from which the painter sees reality, breaks down the aura and the "cult function" of art in its new rational, scientific dissection of reality. Aspects of human behavior, the human face, the gesture, can be singled out and looked at more closely. In its use of the fragmenting, penetrating incisions of representation by technology, film lays bare a new reality. On the other hand, the last line, which suggests that the film offers "an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment," suggests a potential escape from the art-technology opposition into a new indivisible technological stage for reality and perception.[48] This statement preserves the possibility of a return, under a "new law," of a new and rich semantic potential. For the idea of a photographic or filmic image of reality which seems to be free of equipment is itself a "dialectical image," which we

will discuss further below: an archaic, utopian wish for
transcendence over technology, in tension with the material
conditions of such a transcendence. If we read this
hypothesis as such, we see how the new technologies of
seeing, particularly slow motion and magnification, while
potentially redemptive[49] could also eventually reconstitute
a certain magic and aura around the reality the camera
records. That possibility could resurrect the "cult"
function of art -- an imposition of distance between the
scene and the spectator.

The second element of the "new law" of representation
has to do with the variability of the media's reception: the
film, the photograph, and the reproduction of art objects
are disseminated into new contexts which the producers
cannot control, thus making radical cinema more "accessible"
to the people than a radical art. This fact, combined with
the engaging nature of the moving image, suggests to
Benjamin that ideally in film "the critical and receptive
attitudes of the public coincide."[50] But in this
"democratization" of culture Benjamin also sees a danger:
that the audience is not paying attention, that the film's
capacity for intensifying our attention to the world is
countered by the fact that film is mostly seen in a state of
"distraction." Though Benjamin argues that distraction may
have been radical in Dadaistic activities trying to replace

the "contemplative" response to art, he claims that it
serves a different function in film. As Georges Duhamel put
it, the film does not allow the spectator's mind to wander
because it keeps moving. Benjamin agrees:

> The spectator's process of association in view of
> these images is indeed interrupted by their
> constant, sudden change. This constitutes the
> shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks,
> should be cushioned by heightened presence of
> mind.[51]

Both elements on which Benjamin's image of the
liberating force of mechanical reproducibility depend, the
use of the camera to penetrate illusion and examine human
behavior more closely, and the reception of progressive
cinema by an audience in a state of "heightened presence of
mind," make it clear that the media's revolutionary
potential lies not in itself, which can regenerate the old
cult functions of art, but in a certain attitude it could
inspire in the spectator.

The nature of this attitude -- the necessary
"heightened presence of mind" in a state of distraction
which Benjamin was arguing to be a historically new kind of
aesthetic reception in the age of mass culture -- becomes
more important now. The development of television
technology has altered the cultural dynamic of film and

photography, rendering obsolete some of Benjamin's
(modernist) hypotheses about the implications of these new
cultural forms, but the necessity of continually redefining
those implications persists.

Television seems, on the one hand, to manifest even
more clearly some of the characteristics Benjamin saw in the
mass media. In comparison to television, film has acquired
the "aura" that painting and theatre once had. Douglas
Davis points out that film performers are invested with a
"larger than life" aura, while television personalities
"remind their public - when seen in the street - of next-
door neighbors."[52] Furthermore television, as an everyday,
smaller than life presence, disperses its narrative into far
more uncertain, varied, everyday contexts, controlled by the
viewer and not the producer, which would suggest that the
original site of production, the "authentic" scene from
which the television image originates, becomes less
important.

And yet the irrelevance of the original, which for
Benjamin is the hallmark of an art form which can elude
"aura," is not a simple truth in television culture.[53] One
of the strongest elements of television culture is "live"
television, which, though increasingly rare, pervades the
event-oriented conventions of television watching, creating
what Tony Wilson calls, after Austin, a "veridical

effect."[54] Many pre-taped programs (the David Letterman
show, MacNeil Lehrer, the Olympics) are watched as if they
were live, as the taping preserves much of the event-ness of
the event -- particularly in comedy and talk shows. Perhaps
what keeps the convention alive is our certainty that if
something big is happening -- a natural disaster, a riot,
the Gulf War -- television stations will interrupt pre-taped
programming to provide live coverage.

For the home audience, television coverage of national
or international crises or competitions or conferences
constitutes the events themselves, and we keep watching,
however little information the live coverage provides, for
something unexpected. What is exciting about the limited
access of the television journalists to crises, which force
announcers on live programs to improvise, is the evidence
they provide of the human agency, and the limitations of
that agency in television production's coverage of an event
taking place on the other side of the globe. These
interruptions in the mastery of television representation
resurrect our fascination with the distant. During the
student uprising in Tianenmen Square, for example, the
networks were obliged to make do with single map, a still
photograph of a reporter, and a live telephone call, a
makeshift setup which reminded Americans of how far away
China is. Perhaps it is arguable in Benjamin's terms that

live television, which rivets us and positions us more effectively than the system of representation it employs in the rest of its pretaped narrative, resurrects a certain "aura," if aura depends on the survival of a notion of authenticity, because what we seek in live television are fragments of truth, an opening onto the reality of the event.

For a theory of our fascination with these fragments of the world, of the significance of the constant flow of fragments, of image and voice, of reality and of the commodity, brought to us by television, it is perhaps not Benjamin's arguments about mass culture, but rather his theory or practice of "dialectical seeing" which is more suggestive than any historical theory of montage or of filmic representation of reality. Benjamin's philosophy of dialectical seeing is manifest in the _Passagen-Werk_, or Arcades project, begun in 1927, and never finished. Susan Buck-Morss provides an extensive explication of it in _The Dialectics of Seeing_, which she describes as an attempt to "[bring] to life the cognitive and political power of the _Passagen-Werk_ that lies dormant within the layers of historical data of which it is composed."[55]

What was originally supposed to be an essay on the rise and fall of the Paris arcades (19th century Parisian shopping malls) became a collection of fragments of images

and quotations arranged in a form Gary Smith has described
as "paratactical montage"; Benjamin himself describes the
method of his project as "literary montage: I need say
nothing. Only exhibit."[56]

Though montage became the constructive principle in the
Passagen-Werk, the faith Benjamin put in the critical power
of the "dialectical image" went beyond the allegorical
practice of montage.[57] Benjamin saw a dialectical
relationship not just between juxtaposed images but within
single images as well, wherein he found a dialectical
structure of history and social meaning. As Buck-Morss puts
it:

> Benjamin perceived historical nature as an
> expression of truth's essential transitoriness in
> its contradictory extremes -- as extinction and
> death on the one hand, and as creative potential
> and the possibility for change on the other.[58]

Benjamin saw a distinction between both single images and
montages that exposed contradictions in the social world,
and image and montages like Darwin's "panorama of evolution"
which synthesized the discordant and masked the
contradictory elements of the social world they appear to
represent. What mattered most for Benjamin in his notion of
the "dialectical image," was "whether the construction makes
visible the gap between sign and referent, or fuses them in

a deceptive totality...."[59]

Avoidance of "deceptive totality" was what made Benjamin valorize allegorical practice over the symbolic, but other tendencies in Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image reveal an overall theological tendency in Benjamin's thought, which was seeking also to redeem the symbolic. Buck-Morss points out that Benjamin was deeply influenced by Georg Simmels' study of Goethe's concept of "ur-phenomena"; examples or models of biological life which, unlike Platonic ideal essences, actually existed. As Buck-Morss explains, Benjamin too thought of the transient historical objects of the nineteenth century as "ur-phenomena" because, he thought, they contained within themselves "their developmental, conceptual essence."[60]

Benjamin's fascination for the commodity images of mass culture was similarly complicated. Impressed by the Surrealists' treatment of urban phenomena as both "something objective and something dreamt,"[61] he was fascinated himself by the "wish images" of consumer culture, which manifested both the incompleteness of the social order as well as the utopian wish to transcend it. The moment at which such images become dialectical, as Buck-Morss argues for Benjamin, is the moment at which the people can recognize them as mere dream. Thus far, however,

...the collective is not even aware that it is

> dreaming... the inevitable result is that symbol
> turns into fetish, and technology, the means for
> realizing human dreams, is mistaken for their
> actualization.[62]

The delicacy of this distinction, which Buck-Morss is at
pains to draw out, resulted in misunderstanding. Adorno,
for instance, thought Benjamin was equating the dialectical
image with the commodity fetish, and rejected it.[63] But
here we come to the importance of the distinction between
dialectical seeing and the dialectical image: it is in the
way of seeing that such images can be harnessed for a
radical understanding, not in the images themselves. The
dialectical image itself is static, but "a way of seeing
that crystallizes antithetical elements by providing the
axes for their alignment"[64] and recognizes the dialectical
nature of the image and expresses it as the flash of
insight:

> The dialectical image is one flashing up
> momentarily. It is thus, as an image flashing up
> in the now of its recognisability, that the past,
> in this case that of Baudelaire, can be captured.
> The redemption which can be carried out in this
> way and in no other is always only to be won out
> of the perception of that which is being lost
> irretrievably.[65]

Such a moment of understanding is itself not a dialectic of discourse or of process, but rather a transformative moment of understanding, one which "literally, e-ducates our imagination, leading us out of its still mythic stage."[66] The moment of truth such images reveal is fleeting -- it "is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it."[67]

The singular, momentary nature of this revelation about historical objects and dialectical images is not itself static, though the image and the historical object are monads. The truth of the image, as Benjamin puts it elsewhere, "...is bound to a temporal nucleus which is lodged in both the known and the knower," which becomes, in its interaction with the pastness and presentness of the historical object, a "force field" which is "politically charged, polarized dialectically."[68] (As we will see below, this language echoes that used by Bakhtin to describe the "dialogism of the word.") In contrast to the transitory moment of awakening or of knowledge, the dialectical image is a direct representation of a "historical object," which itself is a monad charged with the tension of its place in history:

> Where thought comes to a standstill in a
> constellation saturated with tensions, there
> appears the dialectical image. It is the caesura

in the movement of thought. Its positioning, of
course, is in no way arbitrary. In a word, it is
to be sought at the point where the tension
between the dialectical oppositions is the
greatest. The dialectical image [...] is
identical to the historical object; it justifies
blasting the latter out of the continuum of
history's course.[69]

It is perhaps Benjamin's monadological concept of the
dialectical image and its identity with the historical
object which kept him from interpreting the sequence of
images and quotations which make up the Passagen-Werk. The
theoretical gloss which is missing from it, the lack of
which caused Adorno to call the project a mere wide-eyed
presentation of facts, would have contradicted the
dialectical economy of his method of montage and the
essential dynamic he hoped to impart to philosophy: the
flash of insight, provoked by the crystallization of
opposites in an historical image. As Richard Wolin puts it,
it was an important feature of the dialectical image that it

...remain uninfluenced by the admixture of
philosophical commentary. This was in keeping
with his epistemological asceticism or anti-
subjectivism.... for him, truth was not a
subjective additive, but something objective,

lying dormant within things themselves.[70]

Whatever its significance for philosophy, we see here how close to the symbolic Benjamin's dialectical image comes. Buck-Morss notes the distinction, as well:

> Allegorical image and dialectical image are distinct. The meaning of the former remains an expression of subjective intention, and is ultimately arbitrary. The meaning of the latter is objective, not only in the Marxist sense, as an expression of sociohistorical truth, but also, simultaneously, in the mystico-theological sense, as a 'reflection of true transcendence,' to use Scholem's phrase. Benjamin's 'dialectical images' resemble what Scholem describes as 'theological symbols,' in which even the most 'insignificant' phenomena are 'understood and explained in reference to redemption.'[71]

In this configuration of the dialectical image, identical to the historical object, we can see another dimension to Benjamin's interest in the photographic or filmic image. The faith he places in its revolutionary potential has to do with its capacity to reveal historical, material truth in the world. Thus it is arguable that for Benjamin, the photographic image functioned as a kind of metaphor for a new dialectical symbolic. Photography, like allegory,

gathers insignificant fragments from a decayed culture,
which are then transformed, in the dialectical eye, into
images of truth.

The question which arises, then, if we are to consider
Benjamin's "dialectical image" in relation to the kind of
dialectical seeing embodied in experimental video, is how
his Passagen-Werk differs from, to take a convenient
example, "AlienNATION," whose scope and type of images
roughly parallels Benjamin's own. The tape, like Benjamin's
project, amounts on paper to kind of list, or catalogue, of
the traces of American culture over a certain period of
time, and in fact many of the topics coincide. Both recall,
as Buck-Morss has described, "the Surrealists' fascination
with urban phenomena, which they experienced both as
something objective and something dreamt."[72]
Compare the subject matter in "AlienNATION" (as listed by
Jameson[73]):

> ...optical effects, children's blocks and erector
> sets, reproductions of classical paintings, as
> well as mannequins, advertising images, computer
> printouts, textbook illustrations of all kinds,
> cartoon figures rising and falling... sheet
> lightning; a woman lying down and possibly under
> hypnosis ... ultramodern hotel or office building
> lobbies with escalators rising in all directions

and at various angles; shots of a street corner
with sparse traffic... Beethoven sonatas, Holst's
Planets, disco music, funeral parlor organs, outer
space sound effects, the Lawrence of Arabia theme
accompanying the arrival of flying saucers over
the Chicago skyline... the disco dancers in their
habitat; shots of alien planets; closeups of
various kind of brushstrokes; ads for 1950s
kitchens; and many more.[74]

with those of the Passagen-Werk (as listed by Buck-
Morss[75]):

Arcades, fashion, boredom, kitsch, souvenirs, wax
figures, gaslight, panoramas, iron construction,
photography, prostitution, Jugendstil, flâneur,
collector, gambling, streets, casings, department
stores, metros, railroads, street signs,
perspective, mirrors, catacombs, interiors,
weather, world expositions, gateways,
architecture, hasish, Marx, Haussman, Saint-Simon,
Grandville, Wiertz, Redon, Sue, Baudelaire,
Proust. Central methodological concepts are also
present in the notes: dream image, dream house,
dreaming collective, ur-history, now-of-
recognition, dialectical image.

The difference between these two projects is suggestive

of the difference video makes in Benjamin's notion of
montage. For Benjamin, each image or note file was a
meditation or a collection of quotes and images about a
particular phenomenon of urban life, so that "interiors,
weather, world expositions, gateways," were not
representable by a single visual example but rather a
thorough mediation between the contemporary form and the
historical idea. As Susan Buck-Morss explains it:

> Unlike natural aura, the illumination that
> dialectical images provide is a mediated
> experience, ignited within the force field of
> antithetical time registers, empirical history and
> Messianic history. The airplane, miraculous
> object of the new nature, has no theological
> meaning in itself.... The airplane's theological
> meaning in Benjamin's sense emerges only in its
> 'construction' as a historical object. When the
> originary, ur-image of the airplane is brought
> together with its historically present form, the
> double focus illuminates both industrial nature's
> utopian potential and, simultaneously, the
> betrayal of that potential.[76]

Thus, she continues, the image of an airplane, when
juxtaposed with Da-Vinci's utopian anticipation of the
flight of man, compels the philosophical gaze "not only to

recognize technical nature's original state of innocence, but to study empirical history for the reasons why technology nonetheless came to terrorize humanity."[77]

"AlienNATION" relies, however, entirely on "the historically present form"; in other words, the image of flying saucers over the Chicago skyline, may or may not suggest to the viewer "Da-Vinci's utopian anticipation of the flight of man," or some more contemporary vision of aliens -- it may stimulate any number of associations: the viewer may have seen the movie, or know a history of science fiction movies, or believe secretly in UFOs (and believe that clip to be a document rather than a fiction), or live in Chicago. If the image of the flying saucer were announced as a concept, with a title or a voiceover, the viewer may or may not attend to the difference between the concept and the form given it in the image. And moreover, in this tape, which takes only half an hour to watch, one of the things which is being intentionally frustrated is the effort to read the images historically. Yet that very frustration reveals to us our desire to understand, our knowledge that there is an historical consciousness residing in the gaps between the images. In challenging us to come to terms with that consciousness, the tape demands a more active, conscious, historical kind of reading than television demands.

5. Mikhail Bakhtin and the Ray Word

Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the material excess of signification and voice in language was not his most distinctive move -- a number of critiques of positivism have parallel arguments (such Kenneth Burke, Roland Barthes, Clifford Geertz). His main coup, which is comparable to Benjamin's, was to describe the moral and metaphysical mistake of the drive toward monologism and to designate the novel as a literary genre which engages, rather than suppresses, the irreducible heteroglossia of language.

Bakhtin has been engaged repeatedly in recent cultural studies of the media, both for his concept of the carnivalesque[78] and for his work on the novel for theories of genre.[79] Bakhtin's argument about language has also been used by Robert Stam to describe the "heteroglossia" of the televisual, but there has been a conceptual blurring, it seems, in the application of Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia' to what is really pluralism. Though Robert Stam explicitly denounces such a conflation, his application of Bakhtin to television reproduces it. He merely finds in television a genre which admits into its discourse the multiple worlds and voices that he called "heteroglossia:"

> Television...constitutes an electronic microcosm,

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a contemporary version of Bakhtin's omnivorous

'novel,' which reflects and relays, distorts and

amplifies, the ambient heteroglossia.[80]

Though televisual discourse is a compromised and truncated

discourse, he argues, "there is no unitary text, no unitary

producer, and no unitary spectator; rather, there is a

conflictual heteroglossia pervading text, context, and

reader/viewer."[81] This absence of real control, the play

of centripetal and centrifugal against hegemonic and

oppositional forces, means that the texts produced in the

media "are likely to feature a certain proportion of

resistant messages or at least to make possible resistant

readings."[82]

Stam here confuses Bakhtin's description of language

with his description of the novel. Bakhtin does not say

that the novel merely reproduces heteroglossia, but that it

"organizes" the many-voicedness of language rather than

remaining ignorant or repressive of it. What seems to be

most often forgotten in discussions of Bakhtin's

heteroglossia is the emphasis he places, in the very first

pages of his famous "Discourse in the Novel" essay, on

artistic organization of the "heteroglossia" of all the

diverse speech styles brought together in a novel. "The

novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types

(sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of

individual voices, artistically organized."[83] Moreover,

Bakhtin defines the activity of the "prose artist" as one

who

> elevates the social heteroglossia surrounding
>
> objects into an image that has finished contours,
>
> an image completely shot through with dialogized
>
> overtones; he creates artistically calculated
>
> nuances on all the fundamental voices and tones of
>
> this heteroglossia.[84]

The suggestion that televisual language is heteroglot and

polyvalent like other language does little theoretical work

(except raise questions about the difference between the

heteroglossia of language and the polyvalence and

indeterminacy of image). What we need is a clearer idea of

what the "dialogic," or oppositional, utterance might be in

the language of the mass media.

Bakhtin took on the "stylistics" of the unitary genres

for precisely that reason -- not to dissolve literature into

heteroglossia, but to build a place and a language for

describing the "dialogic" utterance, by which he meant

pointedly active, creative opposition: the street literature

of the fabliaux and Schwänke; street songs, folksayings,

anecdotes, all "consciously opposed to...literary

language.... parodic, and aimed sharply and polemically

against the official languages of its given time."[85] Such

an utterance, as Bakhtin defines it, is _active_ -- amid the force field of heteroglossia, the individual utterance makes its way.

> The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance.[86]

Horace Newcomb engages Bakhtin's model of dialogic interaction with official culture to describe what he imagines as the viewer's activity in relation to television.[87] Though the average viewer cannot make television, Newcomb argues, there is a dynamic in watching which enables the viewer to reconstitute the "strips of dialogically constructed content."[88] Newcomb posits this concept of "strip" as a basic unit of textual analysis, arguing that the appropriate "text" of television is the strip of viewing experienced by a viewer in a given evening.

Though the "strip" of experience or of television viewing echoes Bakhtin's description of "secondary" speech genres and of the unit of the utterance (which is finished only when it elicits a response), what Newcomb imagines, that the viewer's interaction with television is to turn off the television or to change channels, is more a refutation

than a response. We need to penetrate the notion of the
dialogic in television further than this. A fuller
discussion of the way a viewer constructs "strips" or
fragments of televisual discourse and of the texts thus
constructed would be a breakthrough in the urgent project of
understanding and talking about television, image, and
meaning.

Here an example of a "dialogic" experimental video
text, which in fact imitates the model of a viewer changing
channels, might clarify the difference between Newcomb's
individual dialogic text and the "artistically organized"
dialogic text. The tape, "Waiting for Commercials" (Nam
June Paik and Jud Yalkut, 1972) re-presents the "strip of
viewing" in a way that heightens our awareness of that
activity. Like a viewer flipping back and forth between
channels, the tape juxtaposes Japanese Pepsi commercials
with a serious television talk show about television and
theory. The tape begins with a "talking head," Marshall
McLuhan, who is saying:

> The age of the spectator has ended in our
> present time -- for example television is an
> x-ray not a pictorial, not a visual form, x-
> ray. And people go _in_side things, they get
> _in_volved and they go _in_side themselves.

An abrupt cut takes us to a Japanese Pepsi commercial, in

which dozens of Japanese actors in what looks like ceremonial garb are singing a Pepsi jingle. The camera zooms in on one of the singer's faces, whose smile, like the spectacle, is impenetrable (so the viewer can_not_ go "inside" things). Next the tape cuts back to McLuhan, and the speaker's face is twisted by a synthesizer as he says "When two seemingly disparate elements are imaginatively posed, put in that position in new and unique ways, startling discoveries often result." The tape continues to switch back and forth between the speaker and the Japanese Pepsi commercials, and it becomes increasingly funny, partly because of the discrepancy between the two discourses, but also because the impatience and "distraction" of the implied viewer of this tape is inscribed in the pacing and the editing.

The viewer recognizes this switching as a characterization of her own activity. By seeing her own viewer language represented, then, she is able to step back and observe the _effect_ of the interaction among the various elements of television's "heteroglossia." Relieved of the desire to find something she wants (which is what motivates the television viewer), the viewer is free to observe, from a Brechtian cigar-smoking distance, the impact of channel-changing, and the text produced by it. Thus a critical faculty comes into play. As we watch the repetitive, binary

switching between the two "shows," moreover, we come to see that what at first seems to be a lively juxtaposition of specifics (serious Marshall McLuhan versus smiling Japanese woman singing) becomes an interaction between two representative discourses, a typification more in line with Bakhtin's insistence that it is social types, rather than individuals, which are most productively represented in the dialogic.[89]

The gap between McLuhan's optimistic theories about television and television texts themselves is exposed, filled in only by the viewer's dissatisfaction with both -- our perception of television must, at this stage, rest in the gap, in the understanding that the utopia television promises is not happening, or rather that the "global television" which is happening is a globalization of American commercialism.

This example of Newcomb's "dialogic" television is meant to illustrate the inadequacy of the idea of a private "dialogic" text constructed by an individual viewer, but it also illustrates the difference between the <u>literal</u> dialogic and <u>artistically refracted</u> dialogism. In Bakhtin's writings on the novel it seems clear that it is the latter, the "artistically organized" text, which has the active and intentional power to interact with the broader social world.

This unity of artistic intention is connected, in

Bakhtin's discussion, to his view of the dialogism within the word and not simply between speech types. Bakhtin imagines a dialogism not simply among speech genres or between speaker and listener (speech situations codified by rhetoric), but rather a deeper dialogism, an "internal dialogism of the word (which occurs in a monologic utterance as well as in a rejoinder)."[90] This deeper dialogism has two sites -- one is the dialogism of the word, which in its intention to name an object must encounter alien words for that object, and the other is the dialogism of all discourse, which is oriented toward the specific conceptual horizon of the listener.[91] Of the two, Bakhtin warns, the second may overwhelm the creativity of the first:

> Very often, especially in the rhetorical forms, this orientation toward the listener and the related internal dialogism of the word may simply overshadow the object: the strong point of any concrete listener becomes a self-sufficient focus of attention, and one that interferes with the word's creative work on its referent.[92]

An example Bakhtin gives is Tolstoy, whose polemical confrontation with the reader's belief system is typical of the 18th century's "propagandizing impulse [which] leads to a narrowing-down of heteroglot social consciousness."[93] In artistic prose, the dialogism of the word should triumph,

penetrating "from within the very way in which the word conceives its object and its means for expressing itself, reformulating the semantics and the syntactical structure of discourse."[94] Though he qualifies this statement with an insistence that the dialogic word journey through a diverse social space "where individual differences and contradictions are enriched by social heteroglossia," Bakhtin's emphasis on the internal dialogism of the word is repeated throughout his essay.

Early on he describes the multi-faceted meaning of the word liberated from the centralizing, unitary system of literary language and into the social world. I quote this metaphorical description of the prism-like reflectiveness of the word at some length because the metaphor of the intention behind the word as a "ray of light" is suggestive for our study of the dialogic or dialectical potential of the image:

> The way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility. And an artistic representation, an 'image' of the object, may be penetrated by this dialogic play of verbal intentions that meet and are interwoven in it; such an image need not stifle these forces, but on the contrary may

activate and organize them. If we imagine the
intention of such a word, that is, its
directionality toward the object, in the form of a
ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable
play of colors and lights on the facets of the
image that it constructs can be explained as the
spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within
the object itself (as would be the case in the
play of an image-as-trope, in poetic speech taken
in the narrow sense, in an 'autotelic' word'), but
rather as its spectral dispersion in an atmosphere
filled with the alien words, value judgements and
accents through which the ray passes on its way
toward the object; the social atmosphere of the
word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object,
makes the facets of the image sparkle.[95]

The vividness of this metaphor places a distinct emphasis on
the word as image, making its way through the unstable and
cacophonous social world. Later in the essay, Bakhtin makes
a very clear distinction between such an image, which can
carry or bring in heteroglossia, and the poetic image or
trope, which has a merely closed ambiguity rather than a
many-voicedness. Is he making a distinction between a
"natural," or what we have to think of as a photographic
image, and a metaphor?

The problem with the poetic metaphor, he says, is that
it sets up dualities between word and object, dualities that
are contained, in a poem, within the unitary language system
of which poetry partakes.

> It is possible to interpret the interrelationships
> of different meanings in a symbol logically (as
> the relationship of a part or an individual to the
> whole, as for example a proper noun that has
> become a symbol, or the relationship of the
> concrete to the abstract and so on); one may grasp
> this relationship philosophically and
> ontologically, as a special kind of
> representational relationship, or as a
> relationship between essence and appearance and so
> forth...but all these types of relationships
> between various meanings do not and cannot go
> beyond the boundaries of the relationship between
> a word and its object, or the boundaries of
> various aspects in the object. The entire event
> is played out between the word and its object; all
> of the play of the poetic symbol is in that
> space.[96]

In contrast, the value of the doubly-voiced word-which-
represents-an-object, or we will simply say the novelistic
literary image, is that it does not conceal the object

behind a poetic conceit but rather reveals the object-in-
the-world along with the author's decentered place in the
language which attempts to grasp it.

> The novelist speaks of this 'already qualified
> world' in a language that is heteroglot and
> internally dialogized. Thus both object and
> language are revealed to the novelist in their
> historical dimension, in the process of social and
> heteroglot becoming.... In the novel, the 'already
> bespoke quality' [ogovorennost'] of the world is
> woven together with the 'already uttered' quality
> [peregovorennost'] of language, into the unitary
> event of the world's heteroglot becoming, in both
> social consciousness and language.[97]

Thus Bakhtin registers a utopian return to a unity between
word and language, though this new unity is between the
internally dialogized word and the fundamentally heteroglot
language. This potential reopens the possibility of the
"dialogic" in the poetic symbol. As a test, he says, of the
difference between unitary ambiguity in poetry and double-
voicedness in prose,

> ...it is sufficient to take any symbol and give it
> an ironic accent (in a correspondingly appropriate
> context, of course), that is, to introduce into it
> one's own voice, to refract within it one's own

> fresh intention. In this process the poetic
> symbol -- while remaining, of course, a symbol --
> is at one and the same time translated onto the
> plane of prose and becomes a double-voiced word:
> in the space between the word and its object
> another's word, another's accent intrudes, a
> mantle of materiality is cast over the symbol.[98]

Though Bakhtin goes on to describe the importance of modifying the specificity of the individual speaking subject in the novel, arguing that individual character is less important than the "social significance" of that character,[99] our point here is that Bakhtin stresses the importance of refracting the symbols of the official culture with one's own fresh intention.

What this suggests is that neither the "heteroglossia" of television, nor its affinities with the novel, provide adequate ground for the dialogic. Bakhtin's dialogic depends on the interaction between individual intentionality and the social world, an interaction which is most fully realized in the implicit subjectivity of independent video. Unlike the anonymous and official organizing consciousness of the average production team in television, the subjective presence of an individual author remains one presence among many, accountable and never entirely in control, unable to dominate the vitality of dissenting voices.

As a result, as I try to show in chapter four, the "ray word" of the video image, in its peformative interaction with the social space of its reception, are more dialogic in an oppositional sense, and because an individual intention can be perceived in it, permits critical intrepretations that are individualized beyond the blank, totalized meanings attributed to the televisual by postmodern theory.

6. Roland Barthes and Direct Experience

In chapter two we noted the dissolution of Barthes' structuralism in the face of the mystery of the photographic image and his turn toward personal experience of the image as the only appropriate response. Here we will look more closely at implications of that dissolution for the sociology and semiotics Barthes found himself abandoning towards the end of his life. Like Benjamin, Barthes's interest in the photographic blended an interest in the mythological and historical dimensions of the mass cultural images and found that they contained both.[100] Like Benjamin, Barthes found himself drawn to fragments and details of images, toward the poignant traces of the sacred and the utopian in the midst of mass culture. And like Benjamin, Barthes turned toward a valorization of his own, and by implication any viewer's, momentary, specific, and

contingent insight into those intractable fragments.

Barthes began his inquiry into the photograph with an intensive effort to elucidate the relationship of the photographic to various codes: semiotic, aesthetic, cultural, historical, political, mythical. In "The Photographic Message," Barthes argues that the photographic message, if it connotes (and he ends up saying it does), does so in a different register than the "universal symbolic order" of language and other mimetic arts.[101] This is a conviction which he maintains throughout the essay,[102] though as it develops he differentiates between constructed and "immediate" or "traumatic" images. In trying to "read" various kinds of photographs on the level of their production, he discovers a variety of connotative procedures, such as trick effects in the image, the pose of the subject, the meaning connoted by certain objects themselves, "photogenia,"[103] aesthetics, and syntax -- and for each of these elements he describes the difference photography makes to their place in the symbolic order. For instance, he says of objects in photographs that though their use may subscribe to a symbolic order, in the photograph "their interest lies in the fact that the objects are accepted inducers of associations of ideas."[104] Thus the photographer's choice is equally as interesting as the object itself: "Objects no longer perhaps possess power, but

they certainly possess meanings."[105] Towards the end of
the essay, which began with the proposition that the
photographic is purely denotative, he finds that perhaps
only one kind of photograph is really so: the "traumatic"
image. The main message of the traumatic image is that
something happened and the photographer was there, and this
kind of photograph, Barthes says, unless it is incorporated
into another connotational system, is itself insignificant.
"The trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of
meaning."[106]

This notion of the "traumatic" has a kind of resonance
for the trajectory of Barthes' exploration of the "meaning"
of the image, as he keeps returning to the purely
denotational. In "Rhetoric of the Image," he argues that
the appearance of pure, denotative objectivity in the
photograph turns out to be an illusion, one which only
represents a "utopian" or "Edenic" kind of image, "cleared
utopianically of its connotations... radically objective...
or, in the last analysis, innocent."[107] This utopian
illusion, which especially in advertisement disguises the
ideological as nature, is what, in this essay, structural
analysis must expose. He designates three semantic levels
in every image: the linguistic, the denotative (or non-coded
iconic), and the connotative (or coded iconic). He finds
that the denotational element of a photograph is not

substantial but "relational;" and that its coexistence with
the connotative in the mass image is the secret of the
advertisement's success. Because the photograph appears to
represent reality naturally, it conceals its own
constructedness along with the coded message it sells. And
yet this too reveals something about the intersection of
nature and culture, something which might somehow be
systematically described.

Latent within this essay too is a fascination with the
denotational outside of his sociology and semiology, with
its resistance to code (it is "what is left in the image
when the signs of connotation are mentally deleted"[108]),
its connection to human fabrication, and to the event.

> The type of consciousness the photograph involves
> is indeed truly unprecedented, since it
> establishes not a consciousness of the being-there
> of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an
> awareness of its having-been-there.

This pure awareness of the "illogical conjunction between
the here-now and the there-then" is the "real unreality" of
the denoted message, and the miracle of every photograph,
therefore, is that it redeems something of the past:

> ...for in every photograph there is the always
> stupefying evidence of this is how it was, giving
> us, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we

are sheltered.[109]

Nancy Schorr and Henry Sayre have eloquently described the trajectory of Barthes' writing after that essay as he gradually cast off structuralism altogether in an effort to understand the "it happens" in the photograph. Schorr describes Barthes turn to the Zen Buddhist principle of "'awakening to the fact,' apprehension of the thing as event and not substance"[110] as a principle better related to the function of photography than any Western codes of representation. Thus relieved of interpreting his fascination for the contingency of the photograph, in *Camera Lucida* Barthes explores, with a thoroughgoing subjectivity, the affect of the photograph, which he calls the punctum, the element beyond the historical, social, or ethical facts of the picture (the studium), which "pricks" the viewer. He wants to write about the photograph without ignoring his own emotional response: to develop "a view of the object steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria."[111]

Sayre suggests that Barthes' writing became more and more theatrical as it became more and more subjective. He describes Barthes' pose in his writing as something which supplements his structuralism. His confession in the middle of *Camera Lucida* that his "pleasure was an imperfect mediator and that a subjectivity reduced to its hedonist project could not recognize the universal,"[112] gives way

not to a stricter method of analysis, but to an abandonment of the "universal." He quotes Barthes' confession that he would like to be someone who "performs the text," someone whose work "is essentially tied to an indeterminacy."[113] A conceivable extension of Sayre's observation, in light of Barthes' rigorous definition of his departure from "system"[114] and his conclusion that photography is "the impossible science of the unique being,"[115] is that Barthes' theatricality is a method -- through an experiential response to those aspects of photography which affect him, he seeks, to use anthropological terminology, an emic (inside) rather than an etic (outside) understanding.[116]

* * * * * *

What I have tried to uncover in my discussion of these three theorists is a certain model of intensive seeing, one which experimental video exemplifies and demands. Though all three have been "used" to support theories of the revolutionary power latent in the materiality of language and image, their various insistence on new ways of seeing and constructing meaning from that material have been overlooked. And all three remain unique in their dialectical self-positioning between the "modern" and

"postmodern," between language and image, and between Marxism and aesthetics.

Experimental video has also explored new ways of seeing and constructing meaning from the materials of mass culture. And, as I will now try to demonstrate concretely through readings of selected videos, these "new ways of seeing," like those of Benjamin, Bakhtin and Barthes, open the possibility of performative interpretations that redeem these materials of mass culture from the totalized fate to which they are consigned by Jameson and other postmodern theorists.

Chapter IV: Readings in Experimental Video

This chapter will touch on some of the tropes of seeing
suggested by the discussion in chapter three (the
dialectical image, the ray word, the punctum) through
detailed readings of several video pieces. My thesis is
that these "seeing practices" can serve as more accurate
heuristic guides toward understanding the position video art
occupies between the aesthetics and the politics of the
video medium than does Jameson's and other postmodernists'
one-dimensional accounts. In particular they help us move
beyond the inadequacy of the oft-cited split between "art"
and "documentary" video to a general view of video art as a
praxis which is always already an interaction between
aesthetic intention and the socially freighted nature of the
video medium.

But these concepts do not match or contain, in any way,
the variety of creative, semantic activity in experimental
videotexts, and indeed what I hope to show further in this
chapter is how a method of "dialectical seeing," for both
artist and viewer, is extended and complicated in the video
medium to an even more experiential and performative seeing
which critical discourse cannot contain. The moments of
meaning such seeing yields are indeterminate and

provisional, and so are the readings herein. But the provisional nature of that meaning does not, as Jameson would have it, fold itself back into the totality of television culture; rather, it stimulates an activity of construction, one which involves the viewer. It teaches us to see better a new "gap," in Jameson's sense, in the televisual, to understand television through a fuller sense of the alternatives to its system.

The movement of this chapter is from "montage," or attempts at a reconfiguration of familiar mass cultural images and experiences in ways that directly opposes televisual conventions, but reveals, as Benjamin would say, their "utopian" residue, to "performance" video, usually characterized by a single performer using the image as his or her stage for a self-expression in the mode of the lyric. This latter kind of video art has been marked by Rosalind Krauss as "narcissistic," and by others as "lyrical" in the sense of Bakhtin's "unitary" poetry, but I will argue that in its tendency to present the artist's self as split between public social self so often represented by television and private self as it interacts with this historically new medium, this too is an allegorical form "pricked," as Barthes would say, by the fact of the artist's self-exposure.

The chapter ends with an attempt at the kind of close

reading I am calling for and which I see Barthes (if not Bakhtin or Benjamin, who saw the task of criticism as objective) as modelling in his later work: a detailed, subjective response to Bill Viola's work, which relies on the phenomenon Barthes was so fascinated by: the direct apprehension of meaning in experience.

1. Montage and Appropriation

The politics of opposition to "television" in the first decade of experimental video echoed the avant-garde's history of "shock." By rejecting the representational conventions of television, video artists sought, as Benjamin did in his use of allegory and montage, to break up the "deceptive totalities" of televisual representation. But this impulse was mediated, as in Benjamin's case, by a recuperative moment. As Benjamin sought to validate the "wish images" of mass culture, so video artists were aware that television was not the "elite" culture of high art, but "popular culture," and in this fact lay the seeds of an ambivalence, a tension between destruction and construction apparent in video art's "rejection" of television.[1]

Before 1965, the only historical "object" to represent television culture was the television monitor, so Wolf Vostell and Nam June Paik did what they could to "blast" it

out of history and discover its truth, as Benjamin would say. Vostell's "TV Dé-Collage," (1961) mounted a television monitor in a Parisian department store to distort its broadcast, and Paik's "Exhibition of Music -- Electronic Television" (1963) at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany, was a room full of television sets, scattered on their sides, on their backs, or upside down, scratched, disfigured, and transmitting only abstract noise or nothing.

Even in these simple "interventions,"[2] as John Hanhardt describes them, the distinct significance of the monitor object as questioned cultural icon was complicated by a more open-ended interest in the objecthood of the image. As Nam June Paik wrote later:

> I am proud to be able to say that all thirteen
> sets actually changed their inner circuits. No
> two sets had the same kind of technical operation.
> Not one is the simple blur, which occurs when you
> turn the vertical- and horizontal-control buttons
> at home.[3]

Later recontextualizations of the television monitor were more parodic of "shock" techniques than subversive; in his performances with Charlotte Moorman, such as "TV Bra," (1969) in which Moorman wore two miniature television sets on her breasts and "TV Cello," (1971), in which Moorman

"played" a cello-shaped pile of televisions to which she was physically wired so that her playing caused the screen images to change, Paik literally fastened mini monitors onto Moorman herself. Paik's comment on this piece is declamatory and ironic:

> Thus as performer, Ms. Moorman was directing the images on her sets. It was an extraordinary conception and a theoretical masterpiece, because instead of 'being on television,' the televisions were, in fact, on Charlotte Moorman.[4]

Of these pieces, Paik claimed "Video art is not just a TV screen and tape -- it is a whole life, a new way of life. The TV screen on her body is literally the embodyment of live video art."[5]

Characteristically, Paik's humorously hyperbolic oversimplification, in the idea that television and body can be unified so literally, suggests the opposite, (as do the titles of many of his installations: "TV Garden," "TV Sea," "TV Forest") and foregrounds the distance between the two conjoined elements, as allegory does. His exuberance and manic embrace of the medium is always mixed with a deeper concern with "how to humanize the technology and the electronic medium, which is progressing rapidly -- too rapidly."[6] His development suggests that the key to this humanization is not an interface between body and

technology, but a destabilization of the technology, or an exploration of its "variability." In his statement about the 1963 exhibit, he says "INDETERMINISM and VARIABILITY is the very UNDERDEVLOPED parameter in the optical art."[7]

It was the availability of the video camera which triggered critical experimentation with the "objecthood" or materiality of the video image, which would prove to produce less mechanistic and more subjective. One particularly resonant example of "collage" which grows into a dialectical image is Paik and Jud Yalkut's "Videotape Study #3" (1967-69). The tape distorts a grainy black-and-white television broadcast of President Johnson and Mayor Lindsey at press conferences being quizzed about race politics. The image is wrenched, reversed, looped by the horizontal hold, and otherwise distorted, perhaps with the magnet Paik and Yalkut were using in their magnet TV installations at the time. The audio -- the questions and answers -- remain continuous and clearly audible, while the careful faces of the politicians -- Johnson's grim serious look down, Lindsey's carefully carved optimistic face, are heightened and exaggerated by the distortion.

In this critique through estrangement,[8] we can feel the difference that video inaugurated in the strategies of aesthetic critique. Though the concept is simply collage in that it appropriates and reworks materials from other media,

it is distinctly unlike photomontage. The image is annexed from the flow of the television narrative, but the cutting and pasting of filmic or photo montage here give way to the fluidity of the video signal, whose distortion is simultaneous with, and inscribed IN the image itself. Thus the intervention is not the mechanistic cut but the live copresence of the artist's hand and the video signal.

Moreover, though the tape is probably the manifestation of a momentary idea (the disjunction between the message broadcast and the message received), its complexities exceed its own conceptualization in its sheer duration. At the very beginning, the initial moment of the tape, we realize that a distortion of Johnson's face actually affects our attitude towards Johnson: we mistrust him. Then, as the tape continues and Paik and Yalkut's intervention varies (according to no particular pattern), there is a moment, at least for this viewer, at which we experience the "punctum" of this distortion: we find that our focus is not Johnson, or Lindsay, or Paik or Yalkut, but the pathos of the human face. Under the mark of Paik and Yalkut's distracted, critical, gesture of subversion, there surfaces a kind of utopian residue: truth is available in the image.

The reason the distortion is so interesting is not because of the distortion itself, the wave pattern that it superimposes on the faces of the speakers (though that wave

pattern, in an instant of concentration, can come to seem like a poignant figuration of the fragility of the interface between the self and the world), but rather that it focuses on a face. What the tape uncovers about the relationship between television and politics is the reality and the significance of our reliance on faces to judge character. Paik and Yalkut's passion for the image, and a kind of wisdom about the human face and what it reveals, is just as palpable as the critique. The text -- the tape of the various things they are saying -- gives the tape its didactic edge and its articulable meaning, but it is the electronized face, the face trying to communicate, which resonates.

Thus, though seemingly grounded in a Brechtian principle of negation, Paik and Yalkut's tape harnesses the power of the image at the same time that it subverts it. The nonfictional footage of real politicians in the everyday lexicon of televisual politics is preserved "sous rature," so that the personae and the intentions of the speakers are still discernible. Thus the tape positions itself as a genuinely "dialogic" response to an official language; it is an active use or re-use of the official language, in a way that pulls out its contestatory or centrifugal elements, and remains open-ended, disseminative.

Dara Birnbaum positions herself more anonymously among

the mass cultural images she chooses to examine, using a more objective principle of montage. Birnbaum's videotapes of the late 1970s and early 1980s are made up almost entirely of television clips. Norman Klein designates them "syntagms," or "the shortest ritual elements she can find"[9] in television. These syntagms are cut out of popular shows and pieced back together in new configurations, which deconceal their place in the fictions of television culture, and forcing them to reveal their dialectical nature to us.

In "Kiss the Girls, Make them Cry," (1979) Birnbaum uses odd moments from "Hollywood Squares," in which the 'syntagm' is celebrity charm: celebrities (Tony Randall, Julie from the love boat, Melissa Gilbert) perform the casual celebrity personality characteristic of talk shows and game shows. The tone of Birnbaum's electronic narrator is difficult to describe -- sometimes it seems to dwell in coincidences of image and sound, sometimes in ellipses between television syntagms. The soundtrack doesn't help: it is a tinny, computery-sounding song ("Georgie Porgie puddin and pie, kissed the girls and made them cry..."), the lyrics of which are scrolled onscreen, further objectifying the narrative. When the lyrics of the song come to the words "love will fix it," the mechanics of sound and editing conspire to emphasize a moment which a repeated syntagm which reveals the women caught in their own television

personalities; smiling, making embarassed, congenial
gestures. Though we know that it is Birnbaum, and the
women, who are repeating their charming expressions, their
staginess nonetheless emerges in the repetition.

Birnbaum's clips have a different function in "Pop Pop
Video" (1980) which cuts back and forth between speed-
skating in the Winter Olympics and a scene from General
Hospital in which the character of Monica is saying "He
doesn't do anything, he doesn't say anything -- it's just
the way he looks at me sometimes -- now is that not crazy?"
Both are syntagms of familiar television narratives or
rituals: watching the Olympics and watching soap operas.
Unlike "Hollywood Squares," in which sound bytes and
gestures are always only clips, the Olympics and soap operas
are two fuller events whose narrative structure we know so
well that the clips Birnbaum excises randomly from them
invoke whole stories. In trying to reconstruct what those
stories might be, however, the viewer realizes that both
stories are always the same. We might say that in the
Olympics, someone is always favored, someone is always
injured, and someone always wins. In the soap opera, though
a viewer's attachment to a specific soap opera might affect
their relationship to this particular clip, someone is
always trying to figure out someone else's behavior.

Norman Klein identifies the gaps she leaves between

moments from familiar television texts and the effect that
has on the audience as a "scrambled grammar lesson in
audience memories." Klein says:

> ...one feels the ellipses of stories (cut away).
> The gaps are so wide, they seem devoted primarily
> to what the audience can fill in, out of a
> storehouse of old images. In Birnbaum's work, the
> viewer imagines many stories all at once....[10]

But beyond the "scrambled grammar lesson," and between the
ellipses, Birnbaum's repetition intensifies our awareness of
the clips themselves, which are loosened from their
signifying and narrative function and transformed into
indeterminate, perhaps dialectical, images.

In Birnbaum's 1978-79 video montage "Technology/
Transformation: Wonder Woman," the tape opens up onto a
typical television car explosion, looped several times.
Then we see a number of clips of Linda Carter in action,
predominantly clips of her spinning, turning into Wonder
Woman and back again and again. This particular clip has
achieved a certain critical notoriety, and each reader has
offered a different interpretation of it. Benjamin Buchloch
says that the spin "unveils the puberty fantasy of Wonder
Woman."[11] Craig Owens, who criticizes Buchloch's metaphor
of "unveiling" argues instead for "the Freudian trope of the
narcissistic woman, or the Lacanian 'theme' of femininity as

contained spectacle."[12] Norman Klein describes this
representation of Wonder Woman as a roboticization ("We see
her robotically at work...spinning and sparking. She
resembles a Wonder Woman doll abandoned by a child."[13] My
reading of this repetition of Wonder Woman's transformation
spin is that she becomes more and more human. Over the
duration of the loop sequence, the slight stagger in her
step becomes more and more pronounced, so that she begins to
look battered, enslaved. I also think it possible that in
the concept of feminine "transformation" there lies the
residual trope of sexual initiation, and this repetition of
explosion, suspense, and transformation connotes a
ritualization of sexual tension and climax as the casualty
of sexual initiation (an interesting hypothesis on the basis
of this formal device alone but not one, I think, which can
survive the problematic specificity of this reference to a
TV show which does not, in my opinion, stand for any broader
kind of female identity).

The significance of this moment of "indeterminacy" in
Birnbaum's tape is that it was made, like many of her other
tapes, to function in more than one context, in plural
social spaces. Henry Sayre tells us that the image of Linda
Carter's transformation into Wonder Woman was originally
shown simultaneously in both an avant-garde film festival
where it was certain to be read as a commentary on women's

"subjugation to images such as that of Wonder Woman,"[14] and in the window of a hair salon in SoHo where the owner agreed her customers might read it as advertising "a kind of technological Wonder World of transformative potential in its own right."[15]

Clearly Birnbaum meant to open up the image, particularly of Wonder Woman's image, to release new understandings of it in its interaction with the social world. The theme she identifies is more a debate ("psychological transformation versus television product")[16] than an argument, and Birnbaum leaves her critical position unclear. But this image of Wonder Woman might be an instance of a crystallized dialectical truth, a dialectical image. Like Benjamin's "wish images" of mass culture, the figure of Wonder Woman carries within it the traces of both a utopian wish for a new, powerful feminine form, and the disappointing reality of the material object through which it finds expression: Linda Carter, whose body, hair, makeup, and outfit are still determined by a male fantasy.

2. Performance Video

The themes of transformation and fragmentation of the self, and their mediation in video, were approached very differently by artists coming from other disciplines. An

intensified interest in the relationship between
performance, representation, the body, and the video image
led artists to experiment with the surface of the video
image and its relationship to the performing body. Unlike
Paik, whose early performances with Charlotte Moorman
parodied the "embodyment" of video, (thus keeping technology
and the body distinct) these video performers make
videotapes which are literally performances in the surface
of the video image -- both dominated by and constitutive of
the image -- and acutely aware of the relationship between
their performance, the camera, the monitor, and the
audience.

This kind of self-reflexive use of the video camera was
described by Rosalind Krauss as "narcissistic."[17]
Helpfully, in her development of a psychological model (of
narcissism) for the phenomenon of video art, Rosalind Krauss
takes for granted that the body is foregrounded in video:

> ...most of the work produced over the very short
> span of video art's existence has used the human
> body as its central instrument. In the case of
> work on tape this has most often been the body of
> the artist-practitioner. In the case of video
> installations it has usually been the body of the
> responding viewer. And no matter whose body has
> been selected for the occasion, there is a further

condition that is always present. Unlike the
other visual arts, video is capable of recording
and transmitting at the same time -- producing
instant feedback. The body is therefore as it
were centered between two machines that are the
opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first
of these is the camera; the second is the monitor,
which reprojects the performer's image with the
immediacy of a mirror.[18]

The real subject of Krauss' discussion, however, is not the
body but the psyche -- she argues that although video is a
physical medium, "the ease of defining it in terms of its
machinery does not seem to coincide with accuracy; and my
own experience keeps urging me toward the psychological
model."[19]

The psychological situation she sees in lyrical
performance video, particularly in video featuring the
artist or live video feedback installations, is that the
image "brackets out" the performer him- or herself, and
erases the distinction between self and image which is
characteristic of a self-reflexive art. Unlike any other
kind of performance whose written or unwritten text implies
a past or history, which then serves as "the source of
meaning," performances involving live audio or video
feedback are the "prison of a collapsed present, that is, a

present time that is completely severed from a sense of its own past."[20] For Krauss, the collapsed present is connected to a collapse in the distinction between the self and the mirror image, a condition similar to what Freud identified as narcissism. Thus video, she argues, is not like the other arts reflexive, which she defines as the "fracture into two categorically different entities that can elucidate one another insofar as their separateness is maintained."[21] Rather video is like a mirror reflection, which "...implies the vanquishing of separateness. Its inherent movement is toward fusion. The self and its reflected image are of course literally separate. But the agency of reflection is a mode of appropriation, of illusionistically erasing the difference between subject and object."[22]

One of the tapes Krauss mentions in this regard is Bruce Nauman's "Revolving Upside Down," (1968) but the paragraph she devotes to it, which is so attenuated it seems like an editing error, says nothing about its relationship to her paradigm.[23] "Revolving Upside Down" opens on Nauman who is balancing on one foot in a big empty white rehearsal room, but the image is inverted so that he is hanging from the wooden floor, which is now the ceiling. Dressed in white and not particularly identifiable in his distance from the camera, Nauman then performs a simple act in front of a

camera: he balances on one foot, holding his body in a
number of rough arabesques, and turning as he does so.
Turning requires him to adjust the placement of his one foot
on the ceiling/floor repeatedly so that his foot, in
adjusting and taking all the weight off his body, must make
a noise on the floor which echoes in the anaesthetic room,
and sounds like a magnet. This possibility and the
inversion of the image, leads us to see his motion like
that of a magnet being pulled from and released back to a
metal surface. By inverting and thus denaturalizing the
pull of gravity, Nauman reminds us what it is -- a magnetic
force which controls our movement. Thus in the simple,
homespun techne of video Nauman unveils something essential
in our natural sense of place in the world -- gravity, a
force of nature, is unveiled by technology in this piece.

It is difficult to see how this piece fits into Krauss'
"narcissism" paradigm. Even if Nauman's impetus for making
this piece were a fascination with his own body or, more
likely, the possibility of dematerializing his body, its
effect is insistently physical rather than psychological.
Moreover, the fascination with gravity was, at that time,
part of the social atmosphere of the time, as it was the
year of the first U.S. moon landing, which Americans were
able to witness from their own homes through the video
medium, on live television broadcast.

In "Bouncing in the Corner #1" (1968) and "Bouncing in the Corner #2" (1969) Nauman comes closer to what Krauss describes as the desire to "bracket" the self with the machine. In #1, the camera frames, from the front, a male body in black jeans and a white t-shirt bouncing against a blank, clean white corner of a wall. The bounce isn't really a bounce: the body (probably Nauman's) is very relaxed, and is allowing itself to fall gently back into the corner until it hits the wall and rebounds slightly, so that it can fall back again. It seems as if Nauman is trying, insofar as a subjective body can, to be a pendulum -- to demonstrate the physical law that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. The sound of his body hitting the corner is quite loud, even violent. The motion is repeated for a long time, so that the viewer feels uneasily like the performer is masochistic, and begins to meditate on the sameness and on the variations at once.

Once it has remained a constant and entirely repetitive motion for a few minutes we think -- the sheer duration of this piece is what commands our attention -- that duration is an aesthetic and a rhetorical device, which generates a series of divergent ideas and questions. How does a body relate to a building? Does this body experience pleasure or pain in doing this? What does it mean for a body to collapse against a corner (a structural and geometric thing)

-- the _interest_ is not in the corner, it is in the body and how it responds each time it bounces. Elements of both pain and pleasure are suggested by the involuntary twitches of his arms and hands, by the surrender of his body to the movement; it's sexual. He looks comfortable, but his back must be beginning to hurt. Toward the end, as perception becomes exhausted, the tape begins to mean something else: exhaustion, neurosis, masochism. Then madness and boredom. Then stupidity. While the use of time in this video seems to be a formal property, one which allows time for inculcation, it can also seem to work as a kind of test. Thus, as Jameson has noted, the danger of "boredom" in such pieces becomes interesting as an aesthetic response and a phenomenological problem.

Boredom in video implies something about the power relationships in performative media and about the saturation of television culture with entertainment. When Nam June Paik said early on that boredom was a luxury where he came from, he raised the question of the cultural conventions of boredom and entertainment. What is it that keeps us watching? Jameson suggests that boredom "can always be used productively as a precious symptom of our own existential, ideological, and cultural limits, an index of what has to be refused."[24] And, in fact, it has an interesting relationship to "indeterminacy." For boredom is the result

of a disconnection between the performer and the viewer, a
situation in which one or the other has reached a limit of
their ability to understand the other -- the border between
the personal and the social. In this instance, if we were
to see Nauman's repeated bouncing against the wall as a
figuration of the expression "banging his head against a
wall," we might feel that we are being forced to witness a
purely narcissistic (in the broader pejorative sense than
Krauss uses it) or self-involved moment.

"Bouncing in the Corner #2" (1969) offers us a
different perspective, one only the camera could have.
Nauman makes us watch the activity, but in a different year,
a different t-shirt, and from a different angle, and these
elemental changes make a difference in our connectedness to
the tape. The camera is mounted high in the corner into
which Nauman is bouncing, looking down at the body, so that
the walls form a wedge at the bottom of the image into which
the body is falling. From this point of view we see very
differently the way the body collapses and bounces, we have
more sympathy with the body which is closer, linked with us
on a horizontal plane (it's sexy). Also, in this tape we
can see the bottom half of his face, (his mouth and his
unshaven cheeks) at the top of the bounce -- they rise into
the middle of the picture and look relaxed and touchable.
There's a weightlessness about the body which starts to

register as you watch it continuously, which feels like the visual equivalent of a trance reached by chanting. The sound of the impact becomes regular, and the body, rebounding off the wall and coming closer to the center of the picture, begins to look like it's floating up, so this piece begins to be about gravity too. The weightlessness of the body gives the whole thing the look of slow motion or lunar gravity. The wall starts looking rubbery, too. The body looks helplessly acted on by the force of movement itself; the bounce, the pendulum swing, and not the body's muscular action, drives the body.

Because of the camera's position above the body we are allowed to see and feel, rather than merely observe, Nauman's own experience of weightlessness, and this makes all the difference. The mesmerizing effect of the repeated bounce, now that we relate to it, has the effect of generating other memories of the experience of weightlessness, both physical and psychological: of the sensation of falling just before sleep, of the feeling of lightness which follows intense physical activity, of the experience, actually, of bouncing against a wall. In all three of these tapes, Nauman foregrounds the physicality of the body rather than his own persona, which remains inscrutable.

An example of another kind of play on audience

endurance is Vito Acconci's "Undertone" (1972). Acconci
comes in to a small white studio room and sits down at a
table with his arms under the table. He looks down and
begins talking: "I want to believe there's a girl here
under the table." He continues repeating this idea, playing
on the power of belief. Then he puts his arms on top of the
table, looks up at the camera, and starts saying:

> I need you to be sitting there facing me because I
>
> have to have someone to talk to, so I can have
>
> someone to address this to....

Then he looks back down again, closes his eyes, and begins
again:

> I want to believe that there's no one here under
>
> the table -- that it's me who's doing this"
>
> (rubbing my hands against my thighs....) I need
>
> you. I need you to keep your place there, I need
>
> to know that I can count on you.... I want to
>
> believe that I'm touching a girl under the table
>
> (more details)....

The monologue continues, alternating between fantasizing
about a girl under the table performing fellatio and a
lecture to the audience about his need for an audience:

> I need you to filter out my lies -- to separate
>
> the lies from the real part of me. I need you to
>
> filter out the lies so I can keep the real part of

me for myself.

The kind of boredom this tape produces differs from Nauman's repetitive motion; whereas Nauman's attempts to seduce us into an identification with his physical experience, Acconci is working to induce the _social_ captivity that audiences of live performances experience by playing with the two elements of performative presence video is capable of: a direct, personal utterance (which television all but eliminates), and sexuality (which television exploits). It becomes excruciatingly and aesthetically boring, while his address to the audience begins to sound more and more like he's pleading with a lover -- "I need you to stop me before I go too far." After the first two minutes of the tape, our instinct is to turn it off. But it is hard to budge because he continually alters what he's saying, giving us a constant difference in his repetitions. Of course, the most obvious "hook" is that there may or may not be a girl under the table and he may or may not be masturbating, but something profound about the way we watch television is built into the experience of the tape. We are compelled, as television viewers, into a stupefying fascination with the event. The tape ends, by the way, in the middle of a description of an erection.

If Nauman and Acconci subject themselves to the medium, placing themselves in an ironic form of subjugation to it,

Peter Campus wants to determine its metaphorical, transformative potential. Campus' "Three Transitions" (1973) is one of his most famous tapes, described by Ingrid Wiegand as among the most "elegant visual plays upon the human presence in space."[25] In short "exercises," Peter Campus shows us three literal transformations of his own image, using basic video techniques to rip, burn, and erase his own image. In the first, he stands before the camera in a medium shot. Then he appears to stab himself in the back (which, we suddenly see, is merely paper onto which his image has been projected somehow), climb through the papery hole he has created in his own center, and step through it. In the second transition, Campus is putting something on his face, into which is chroma-keyed another image of his face, so that he appears to erase his face, or unmask, revealing...another image of his face. In the third transition he burns a living image of his own face, (a video image which has been chroma-keyed onto a piece of paper) leaving blackness.

Campus' perceptual play is done with irony, with a light-handedness, and the tapes are low on presentational aesthetics and have the feel of experiments -- Campus' use of his own image is stiff and somewhat mechanical, as if to emphasize the lack of affect in technological "transformation." For the metaphors he plays with, violent

images of self-destruction and magical transcendence, become mere game or technique in the "cool" medium of video. If he were to perform this piece live, these metaphors of transcendence would be laden with a symbolic affect, and Campus would be presenting a very different self from the remote, conceptual persona his technological ingenuity gives us, which uses technology to transcend and displace the physical self with the mental self.

Campus is even cooler in his tape about color, "R-G-B" (1974) (Red, Green, Blue). Though we expect, and in fact experience, a play on the emotional affect of color in video, he has described R-G-B: "My most dryly-stated tape, free of insinuation, [R-G-B]... simply the exploration by a performer of the color system in which he is trapped, much like a prisoner pacing off his cell."[26]

First, against the standard clear blue of the television screen he shows us the effects of different photographic filters - red - green - blue. Then he projects slides of pure color. Then, to demonstrate electronic color interaction, he points the camera at a monitor and creates an endless spectrum of color. Finally, his image, his face and the very fine outline of a figure is dissolved into an explosion of fuzzy electronic color -- red, blue and green. By demonstrating the way color is manipulated physically, mechanically, and electronically in video, Campus is again

undercutting "meaning" with technique. However, despite his clinical approach, his play in the video color spectrum has the peculiar effect of representing all television images. The blurry synthesis of red, blue, and green stimulates our "audience memory," and, as certain sensory stimulants can evoke whole experiences or cultures, this range of colors seems, like the taste of Proust's Madeleine, to condense all of our experiences of television.

Joan Jonas's videotapes attempt to objectify and dematerialize the self through the video medium. But in Jonas' work we see, perhaps more clearly than in any other videotext, here a certain "narcissism" at work, particularly as Jonas literally uses video as a mirror of herself. However, Jonas' autotelic experiments with the medium do not, as Krauss argues "eras[e] the difference between subject and object,"[27] but rather reveal the split between the subjective and the objective within the single self (particularly within the feminine single self).

In performance Jonas' style has been restrained, disciplined, not focused on herself but formally concerned instead with space -- with finding ways of flattening, attenuating, dislocating it, without ever penetrating it. In performance, Jonas has used mirrors to interrupt, fragment, and disorient space, and her attraction to video was initially part of the same impulse.[28] This tendency

was partly feminist (Yvonne Rainer's influence is evident in Jonas's recollection that, at the time, she "didn't want to be a persona or active personality. In one piece, I was stiff as a board; my body was carried from one place to another"[29]) and partly psychological. Jonas' interest in distorting the performance space manifests a contradictory relationship to performance, and Jonas' formal equation between the mirror and the video medium informs the persona and the tone of her work.

Howard Junker argues that Jonas' performances and videotapes reveal a contradictory need to expose herself and hide herself. The extreme distance placed between performers and audience in her "Jones Beach Piece" (1970) and "Delay Delay" (1972), in which the sound accompanying certain actions (blocks of wood clapped together) were delayed by their extreme distance from the audience, demonstrates a formal and a personal fascination with the dialectic between presence and absence, concealment and exposure, performing and not performing. But Junker's argument is more personal:

> On the surface, at least, Jonas' performances do appear to be counter-phobic rituals designed to prevent 'penetration.' With exhausting discipline, she stacks together interludes and incidents of dance and drawing to form barriers

against both pain and interpretation. Still,

performance also seems to grant her 'permission'

to attempt the most literal, if highly stylized,

form of acting out, of delivering repressed

material to consciousness. So that in their

deeper structures Jonas's performances are

cathartic fore-plays in which she drives herself

towards release or, as she puts it, purging.[30]

For Jonas the mirror and the video medium are shields from

the "pain and interpretation" of her self exposure. Junker

writes "In later works, she would stare out at the audience

from behind a mask, a veil, a chadri, a pane of glass, or

through a video monitor...terrified but defiant, threatened

by the audience, but at the same time seduced by their

attention, their tacit approval."[31] In "Mirror Piece,"

(1970) Jonas inspected herself nude before the audience with

a mirror, with grueling and clinical intensity. After that,

Junker notes, Jonas's disguises proliferated.

"Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy" (1972) is the best

known example of Jonas' early use of video in performance.

This tape was originally a live performance piece in which a

television monitor was used to present another

spatiotemporal order than the live one, one which multiplied

and detailed the live performance.[32] Though the camera

stands in a simple, objective relationship to the

performance, and its aesthetics are rough -- the tape is black and white and grainy, and the soundtrack is incidental -- Jonas uses it in a way that alters her performing persona.

The soundtrack is only Jonas' quiet, private humming as she performs a series of actions. She begins by donning a cheap mask of a pleasant smile, and a feather headdress. The effect of the costume is instant -- though we know the mask is cheap, shiny, and false, the video image mediates it differently and it becomes somehow real. With the costume on, Jonas strikes two poses, puts on a sweater, picks up a mirror and plays with her image -- for herself, and then, with a different angle of the head, for us. She turns on an air machine to "windblow" her hair, and studies the effect in the video image.

In this moment, and in various other moments throughout the contests Jonas stages with herself (racing to trace the outlines of various objects on paper, dropping pennies into a large mason jar of water in attempt to make them land inside a whiskey glass sitting on the bottom), the mask is naturalized not just by the personality it takes on in action, but in moments when it is presented directly to the camera. Because of the roughness and cheapness of the video medium, the mask seems real, an effect it would not have in a live performance situation. In the process of this tape

we see an emerging duplicity in Jonas' performance. The mask, and the self-inspection it allows her through the persona of Organic Honey, paradoxically brings us closer to Jonas and, through her, to the kind of self-concealment that the image reveals. Like Barthes positioning himself before the camera, we see Jonas working on herself from within -- behind the vain, smiling persona of Organic Honey we see an aspect of Jonas which has not surfaced before and which, paradoxically, vanishes when Jonas takes the mask off and confronts the camera with her own distinctively deadpan, masked face. Video allows Jonas to perform, because it abstracts her or conceals her in some basic way.

Constance de Jong has written that the television is Jonas' "toy" for exploring the relationship between personal meanings and the implicitly public image of the video monitor. As Jonas herself put it in her entry in a mid 1970s anthology of video art,

> At first I saw the monitor/projector as an ongoing mirror.... Video is a device extending the boundaries of my interior dialogue to include the audience. The perception is of a double reality: me as image and me as performer.[33]

Krauss would code this phenomenon, in which the performer uses the video apparatus as a mirror and becomes absorbed in that version of the self, as "narcissism" in the strict

Freudian sense:[34] a condition in which the ego is unstable
and thus consumed in a search for a self-image. The
implication of this reading, which stands outside of Jonas's
search for the relationship between her interior self image
and her exterior one -- between live presence and televised
image -- is that Jonas's work is therefore somehow closed --
between herself and herself. The "other" of Jonas'
performance is not the audience, or a text, but simply
herself.

To what extent does our intimate experience of Jonas'
obsession with her own image mean anything for the audience?
And to what extent does the mediation of video augment the
"narcissism" of this private exploration? The "meaning" of
Jonas' obsession with her own image is different for the
audience of the live performance than it is for the viewer
of the tape. For the audience of the live performance,
according to Constance de Jong, the video offers a more
intimate and differently coded space than the live
performance. For instance, the videotape shows us the
objects Jonas traces on the paper, whereas in the live
performance the audience can see only that Jonas draws, not
what she draws.

Without a live performance to compare the video space
to, the audience expects something more public from Jonas'
performance. The intimacy and self-reflexivity of her

activities on camera tests the limits of our understanding. However, within itself the video does draw us closer to the issue of the mask than the live performance would. As a fundament of Jonas' own performance persona, the mask operates on a subtler and more complex level in the videotape than it would on a stage. If we concentrate on the punctual moment in which we realize what the mask and, by extension, the video image permits (and denies) Jonas, the drama that Jonas stages in this piece, of the private inspection of one's own image, emerges. Jonas has also used the mask itself to stand for the video author in another piece, "Brooklyn Bridge," (1988) in which a graphic mesh mask form is superimposed over her graphic play with drawings and live footage of the Brooklyn Bridge -- representing the disembodied subjectivity of her vision. Moreover this concern, as the constant condition of the feminine, has a social dimension. Henry Sayre's astute comment on the broader significance of this self-inspection feminist video reveals is suggestive:

> ...acting -- acting in a performance sense of the word, not in a theatrical sense, acting so that the personal surfaces in the image as difference -- is what makes it obvious that the female body is culturally encoded.[35]

A more fully developed exploration of the mediation of

the feminine in video is Joan Jonas' "Vertical Roll" (1972),

which is, as Kathy O'Dell describes her work, a play with

the "ontology of the body-in-fragment,"[36] "paradigmatic" of

feminist video art of the 1970s exploring the relationship

between the private body and the public image. The private

body, represented on videotape, is in tension with "the

nature of video to yield any image to the public."[37]

Jonas' video works this tension into the tape in several

ways. First, the clarity of the image is deliberately

obstructed by a formalized reception problem: The tape is

framed by a permanent vertical roll in the screen, caused by

a desynchronization between the input and output signals,

which is never adjusted. As a result the images are

imprisoned by the black bar and the constant upward pull of

the vertical roll, (which reminds us how easily the video

image usually _is_ yielded to us as public) and a harsh,

regular clanking sound (it's hard to tell what it is, but

it's apparently a silver spoon hitting the screen, according

to O'Dell).

Second, through this estranging frame, we see various

pieces and permutations of a woman's body and a kind of

history of its representation in the mass media. The image

sequence establishes the theme of fragmented representation

of the female body -- first her head, which sinks out of the

screen and is eventually replaced by an emerging body, whose

relationship to the camera is unclear because it seems too close to let the camera frame it. Then we see bare legs, arms, a face, and then, at a crucial moment, a frozen image of a nude woman which is suddenly static (like a still photograph in a porn magazine) and, with the vertical roll and the clanking sound, seems to be sliding out of the machinery of the videotext as if out of a printing press. The next significant moment in the continuous mutation of the images of her body is a close up of her bare feet jumping (a Muybridge-like image). And then we see a close up of a woman's torso in a bondage outfit which (because of the clanking sound accompanying the vertical roll and because we see, as the camera circles behind her, that her bra is unhooked) seems to suggest that television literally dominates women through representation.

Finally, at the end of the tape, Jonas herself enters the screen in front of the vertically rolling screen and we get an extremely intimate closeup of her face which slowly turns to look directly into the eye of the camera. She then inclines her head as if laying it down next to the viewer's, so that the entire screen is filled with a frank, intimate, closeup of Jonas herself, looking directly into the camera. After the violence of the representational sequences which have preceded this final image, this moment comes off as a kind of ideal direct address -- a strong and direct feminine

sensuality which contrasts with the erotic fragments presented in the tape. The force of the speaker's intervention between the video's mediation of her, and the audience of the video, is dependent not just on her placement in the structure of the video, but on the relative presence of her face and her look into the camera.

In the difference between Jonas' exploration of the mediation of her own image through the camera, and Martha Rosler's presentation of the same issue, we can see the difference Bakhtin spoke of between the open-ended artistic intentionality of the ray word and the "propagandizing impulse which leads to a narrowing down of heteroglot social consciousness." However self-centered, Jonas submits her own image to the mediating objectivity of the video image, thus foregrounding the material dimension of self-mediation brought on by video.

Martha Rosler, on the other hand, refuses to explore the "materiality" of video in her performance pieces, a research she sees as belonging to aesthetics. Instead she explores the representation of women instead by foregrounding the social relations represented in mass cultural images. As the title of one of her best-known works indicates ("Semiotics of the Kitchen"), Rosler uses video as a new kind of rhetorical tool in which she posits kitchen equipment as semiological signs with their own

cultural context. With a very basic equipment setup, (the camera she performs for is stationery and frames her in a medium shot, and she stands facing it, expressionless) Rosler positions herself behind a kitchen counter, on which we see a variety of ordinary utensils. Rosler gives us an alphabet represented by each utensil. She picks them up one by one, names them, and demonstrates their use with gestures implying they are weapons.

Rosler's video essays handle the "meaning" of the video images we get from television differently -- rather than explore them, or dwell on the objects themselves, she codifies them. Rosler doesn't mean to leave anything to chance -- she describes the piece as a "polemic," and it is grounded in a language, a semiotics, which she assumes to have stable meanings for the audience. In a talk at the Museum of Modern Art in April, 1983, Rosler reveals the personal nature of her interpretation of the term "semiotics."

> I was interested in the idea of, as they say, the language speaking us. That is; that the woman herself in this situation is symbolic of, to speak metaphorically, a person being stamped by or formed by the situation in which she finds herself. So that the implements in the kitchen which are defined by this unitary function also

are letters of the alphabet. When we think of

humans as tool-using creatures, we also think of

the tool as being the extension of the human, but

I would say that the woman is the extension of the

tool. The woman becomes the wielder of the tool,

or subsidiary.[38]

The effectiveness of the piece doesn't necessarily depend on

a semiological understanding of American culture, but it

does depend to some extent on an understanding of the

conceptual basis of the piece to hold the audience's

attention. Rosler expects us to see her as representative

of Woman Imprisoned, rather than as Martha Rosler the

Conceptual Artist.

An audience member ignorant of those codes, however,

will be just as fascinated and confused by Rosler's self-

presentation as by the objects she holds up for our

scrutiny. What escapes from her polemic, her structural

positioning of woman and cultural representation, is Rosler

herself. Her stiffness and expressionlessness suggests that

she is deliberately not performing but that her point of

view cannot be represented by anyone else. Thus she is both

present and not present.

The strangeness of Rosler's performance persona is

further revealed in "Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply

Obtained," (1977) in which Rosler stages an iconoclastic

allegory of scientism or of dissection. She foregrounds her

directorial control and her omniscient narrator status in a

voice over at the beginning:

> This is an opera in three acts. This is a work
>
> about perception. There's no image on the screen
>
> just yet. It isn't about the perception of small
>
> facts. It isn't about the physiology of
>
> perception. It's about the perception of the
>
> self, the meaning of truth....

Then Rosler performs the "Citizen" being measured by a team

of male and female "scientists," in what Sayre calls "a

parody of Leonardo's famous Study of the Human Body."[39] In

the first "act," the researchers measure every dimension of

Rosler's body and pronounce their relation to the "average."

When the measurement exceeds or fails the "average," a

strange, electronic voice says "ha ha ha." During the

second act, the measurement gets extremely detailed -- the

researchers have her sit, they measure her hip spread while

sitting, they have her spread her legs, they have her lie

down under the measurement map they've made of her on the

wall, while Rosler is saying:

> To think of herself in parts, from the outside...
>
> a mechanical narcissism that it is a sign of
>
> madness or deviation to be without....

Then, as she gets dressed, puts her hair up, and puts on a

dress, (she entered the examining room in pants) the
voiceover continues:

> To lick one's lips to make them wet... to keep
> thighs pressed together... to keep the brow
> smooth... to keep the hands together... to learn
> what is called the color of flesh... to see some
> hair as good, and other as bad, to see one's parts
> as tools... the total woman remembers to bathe
> everyday, to rid herself of personality so that
> she can be smooth to be projected upon.... They
> say women are masochists by nature. What nature?
> I say masochism is a crime against women.

In the third act, Rosler is kneeling over a white square
board on a table, cracking eggs into a bowl. She shows us
the bowl of eggs. Now the voiceover is a kind of chant,
which accompanies slides of other women being measured:

> Femicide, femicide, crimes against women,
> clitoridectomy, bound feet, immolation,
> infibulation, servitude, unpaid labor,
> psychological assault, chattelization, madness,
> childbirth, torture, forced motherhood, shame,
> scorn, fear, threats, sterilization, rape....

The development of the text to this point makes clearer what
the "political aesthetic" of both Rosler's tapes suggest.
Rosler will provide no aesthetic images as long as the real

images of women, images of brutality against women, remain
in our culture. These are the images, Rosler suggests, that
must be brought to consciousness. But the most prominent
image the viewer is left with is the image of Rosler naked,
submitting herself to measurement. It is difficult in this
tape, as in "Semiotics of the Kitchen," to bracket out
Rosler herself who, as a reluctant and inexpressive
"performer," exposes herself so completely.

3. Bill Viola

Bill Viola is inspired, like Barthes, by the Japanese
haiku and the Zen koan, and with Buddhism's language of
direct experience, which does not believe in transcendence,
but which sees nothing as trivial. In an article titled
"History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime," Viola quotes such a
koan:

> On a mountainside one afternoon about 2,500 years
> ago, the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, delivered
> what has come to be known as the 'silent sermon.'
> He was offered a yellow flower and was asked to
> preach the Law to a large congregation of his
> followers assembled there. Shakyamuni held out
> the flower in his hand before the group. There
> was a hushed silence as the people waited for him

to speak. They waited and waited, but he remained
silent, firmly holding the flower. Shakyamuni's
gaze caught the eye of his foremost disciple, who
smiled broadly in recognition. With the exception
of Maha Kashyapa, no one could understand what the
Buddha meant.

From this story Viola is reminded, as he says in this
article, that this kind of communication, from within an
image rather than from outside of it, is very old -- that it
substantially predates contemporary attempts to reconcile
the relationship between nature, image, high culture, and
language.[40]

The archaic element in Viola's thought has led many to
connect him directly with romanticism, particularly as he
himself cites William Blake's dictum from "The Marriage of
Heaven and Hell:" in a "General Statement" about his work:
"If the doors to perception were cleansed, then everything
would appear to man as it is: infinite."[41] He goes on to
say

The television medium, when coupled with the human
mind, can offer us sight beyond the range of our
everyday consciousness, but only if it is our
desire, both as viewers and as creators, to want
to do so. [42]

Viola's work lives up to this manifesto, and thus it has

provoked a flurry of breathless, enthusiastic and distinctly modernist language. Gene Youngblood, for instance describes Bill Viola as the leader of "the young tradition" of video art, the creator of "masterpieces" of the medium, a truly "great" artist who "can do great things without being clever" and with "an unmistakable signature."[43]

Without being liable for Youngblood's categories, we might note that his excitement has to do with a genuine exploration of the mediation between seeing and experience, the kind called for by Benjamin and Barthes. Though more concerned with the natural world than the social, Viola's tapes are popular.[44] Despite its "scanting of the social," Amy Taubin calls Viola's work "the most mesmerizing and intelligent body of work in the medium's short history."[45]

Viola's play with the science of perception, and in the connection between perception and knowledge, are grounded in a belief that it is not the medium, or what it represents which is so revolutionary about video art -- it is rather the new parameters of our physical and mental subjectivity, the new drama of man the performer and man the creator, which are so compelling. Thus Viola is interested in the full bodily experience of images -- he says what is interesting about dreams is that we feel like we are living it:

...it is a fidelity of experience, of being. The

> total sensation of what it is like to really <u>be</u>
> there fills your body -- what it felt like to
> breathe air then. These are the real 'images.' It
> is always a shock. We may be able to artificially
> record images, sounds, and words, but we are a
> long way from recording anything resembling
> experiences.[46]

To reproduce this fidelity of experience, or rather
experience perfected, is Viola's strategy of meaning. In
John Minkowsky's words: "Video is a mediator of direct
experience: in Viola's hands, it is often the means by which
the viewer is brought to recognize events in the physical
domain which are <u>within the range of human perception</u> but
which, because of their scale, duration, or location, may
exist <u>beneath/beyond the range of normal human
awareness</u>."[47]

Thus Viola uses time very carefully, to coax
experiences and associations from the viewer rather than to
present them complete. Viola works in a way which is
directly opposed to the interruptions of montage -- he
doesn't fragment but rather extends the image in time.
Viola wants to recreate his experience of insight for the
viewer -- his goal is not to explain but to "[put] someone
in a state where they can come to realizations that might be
the same as, or similar to, the ones I had.... That's why

these tapes relate to time -- because that realization is temporal."[48]

Full discussion of the "temporal realizations" in Viola's videotexts is literally impossible, I will discuss only two of his tapes here: "Chott el-Djerid: A Portrait in Light and Heat" (1979), and more extensively, "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like" (1986), which incorporates a number of motifs and themes of his work.

"Chott el-Djerid: A Portrait in Light and Heat" (1979) marked a transition for Viola away from the rigidity and control over his early tapes, and toward a more flexible and open-ended use of footage gathered without being sure of the outcome -- he says it is "the first time since 1973 that I let the scene determine the piece."[49]

The tape opens on a white screen: the screen is filled not with video snow but with actual snow. As the snow clears we are blinded by the reflected light, light reflected on a snow-covered plain, in which we are disoriented. Then out of the whiteness, slowly, we detect a small dark image, like a tree in a snow field -- it fades, but it enables us to form an image of a wintry landscape. Gradually we recognize...two posts in a field... a small clump of trees and rocks... a few trees and buildings....a slow zoom approaches one of the buildings: it's a barn in the snow. It's snowing, and there is a faint soundtrack of

wind... we see a few silos...a telephone pole. Then a quick
cut to a clearer day, snow on ground, buildings. Ah -- blue
sky, a little forest on the snow field. Where is this
place? The sounds he uses are so subtle, like the sound of
wind in a windbreaker, and they evoke the vast silence of a
snowfield with no end in sight. He holds still for a quite
a long time, about two minutes, on one snowfield with one
dark spot on the horizon -- the shot seems to be in real
time, but the lack of movement is so disorienting we don't
know, until we realize after about a minute that the dark
spot is a person walking towards us.[50] The figure's
progress is fascinating to watch, partly because we know
this is a natural landscape and it is a human being, however
abstracted in the intensity of this light, and partly
because it promises to orient us -- to inform us of how we
will relate to this landscape. The figure is struggling and
seems occasionally to sink into the snow.

Then, before the person gets very far, a match cut
moves us to another landscape, also vast and flat -- the
ground goes brown (bleached) ground and blue sky. The
texture of ground changes in several increments -- but the
horizon line remains constant. As ground and sky change and
move, in what seem to be a series of cuts through scenes so
static the cuts look like stills, and then suddenly a person
in a coat, whose footsteps are clearly audible, walks into

the landscape and throws a rock into a squarish opening in the field, which is filled with muddy brown water. We realize it's a hole in a snow field still, not a wheat field as it seemed. After a close up on water, the camera returns to the landscape and we realize we are in a desert -- we see the shimmering image of an oasis, which looks like a mirage. Several of these different shapes and colors-- disorienting -- we don't know what we see -- J. Hoberman calls this section "a half hour fugue of mirages, heat angels, and fata morganas. Bleached mosques flutter like flags, shimmering buses are reflected in the road, vistas melt into Jovian striations."[51] I wondered if it was the landscape as reflected in the water, but nothing was upside down.

Then out of one of the scenes, a figure sort of stands up out of the watery shimmer of dark shapes and seems to walk. Then a whole crowd does -- a beautiful and highly abstract image. The wateriness of the images continue, as if now we're forever underwater. The effect of heat mirage on the images is magnified by a special telephoto lens, which Viola used to reveal "the otherwise subtle effects of the natural phenomena."[52] In a statement about his works made to a television station in Rochester, Viola writes:

> Ultimately, the piece is not so much about mirages as it is about the limits of the image, ie. at what distant point does the breakdown of normal

conditions, or the lack of adequate visual

information, cause us to reevaluate our

perceptions of reality and realize that we are

looking at something else, something out of the

ordinary, a transformation of the physical into

the psychological, existing literally on the

borderline between the real and the illusory.[53]

If "Chott El-Djerid" explores the physical parameters
of the boundary between seeing and illusion, "I Do Not Know"
explores metaphorical potential in video's ability to move
the literal into the realm of signification. Unlike his
earlier work, which he has characterized as "song" like,
this tape is, according to both the anonymous promotional
copy accompanying it and Michael Nash' review of it, an
"epic."[54] The promotional copy for the video, meant to
orient the average viewer renting the video, is typical of
the writing which tends to surround and support video art in
museums and publications: it appeals to a consensual sense
of the symbolic rather than a precise concept:

["I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like" is] ...an

epic journey in five chapters... a personal

investigation into the inner states and

connections to animal consciousness we all

possess.... evokes a timeless view of the natural

world and our place in it, speaking to us in the

inner language of subjective thoughts and

collective memories.

Michael Nash is more precise -- he uses the term "epic" in a structural sense, arguing that "I Do Not Know" enacts the archetypal epic narrative plot: a heroic descent into the underworld, a journey which is a quest for knowledge and a way to return with it.[55]

Nash' formulation is interesting but for the time being suspect; it disorients a full experience of the tape, which is grounded in the experience of seeing and not in literary conventions. Viola has said:

> It is my ultimate aim to have my works broadcast over the airwaves right into people's homes. The tapes are realistic, concrete in every sense of the term. They differ from ordinary programs made for film and television in that they use subjective experience as their base rather than the common literary or verbal models.[56]

The following is my reading of the tape, which at times contends with Nash' reading as a way of providing a kind of critical dialogue.

What Nash calls the "prolog" begins suddenly. There is no slate telling us how long it is, what it is, or anything -- we see only the title, I DO NOT KNOW WHAT IT IS I AM LIKE, in white font over black, then it begins, disorienting

us immediately as the image is sideways and unfocused,
moving to the vital drumbeat and heavy music of a dancing
ceremony somewhere in the Fuji islands. A very large
checkered grain in the image obscures our clear vision of
the ceremony which is the source of the music and instead
turns quickly to nature and water -- the camera soon goes
underwater and only then are we permitted to see clearly, to
concentrate, to focus. Nash says this moment "suggests a
drowning,... submerging through the mirror into a parallel
realm," but this is a difficult conclusion to make on the
basis of the images themselves; the underwater is an
alternate but not a parallel realm. It feels alive, not
dead, especially because we see living organisms and the
water is greenish, as I recall, refreshing and revitalizing.
It seems to be the water of life, not the river of death.
The fact that water has both connotations is a functional
ambiguity in Viola's tape as a whole, though Marita Sturken
quotes Bill Viola talking about Hatsu-Yume (1981):

> Video treats light like water -- it becomes fluid
> on the video tube. I thought that water supports
> the fish like light supports man. Land is the
> death of the fish. Darkness is the death of
> man.[57]

Before the camera is submerged we see a disorienting
sequence, in which the images accompanying the music are

slowly, smoothly manipulated -- the camera is inverted, the grain is enlarged, the images seem solarized as they pick up the watery shimmer on things (a shimmer one sees in a car driving on a flat plain, and also a shimmer Viola used extensively in "Chott el-Djerid" (1980). Michael Nash has described it as "mirage wash" which "locate[s] the creatures in a fluidity of being."[58] Such an interpretation suggests that the sudden clarity of the images underwater is a kind of real vision, called for by the shimmer on things above water, longed for by the hallucinatory feeling of heat that mirage evokes. The question, then, since the image evokes our own sense memories of being underwater and thus cannot remain purely symbol, is whether the submersion is the beginning of a journey or the establishment of a theme.

Then the tape cuts to black -- throughout the tape the edits will always be simple and sudden cuts -- and we see black and silence for a few moments. Then what Nash has identified as a transitional section, where the camera (he calls it the "point of view") surfaces in "the literal underworld of a cave," which is formed by water. But at first it is not identifiable as a cave. We see blackness, then some unidentifiable shapes begin to encroach on the edges of the frame (again, very slowly) and it looks as though they are moving in on the frame, and they soon begin to look like little growths; perhaps stone, perhaps lichen.

As they grow we begin to realize it's the camera that's moving, not the stones, and we see that the camera is pulling out of the mouth of a cave. At the same moment we realize the sound of the interior of the cave, that dripping, echoing sound, is being turned up. As the camera gets even further away, we are disoriented again -- the opening is shaped like a vagina, and we are given no reference points -- we don't know which side is the bottom or the top, especially because the image has, up to this point, only been sideways, submerged, or blank, and we don't have the convention of an upright camera to rely on.

Next: closeups of the inside of the cave. We see a series of closeups of the rock formations, in the convention of studies, (carefully lit, still medium shots) which shows us that the rock formations, the stalactites, are unexpectedly like flesh -- flesh-colored and slimy and rounded -- as if we are really seeing the insides of a mammal. Nash sees in this the allusion to a kind of "proto-organic evolution." I see a tension in this image between the symbolic and the experiential, which echoes the tension generated by the "drowning" image. When the fleshy image turns out to be stone, we see an idea: transience of flesh versus permanence of stone, but we are also "pricked" by the sheer evidence that this stone looks like flesh. One of the last rocks we see in the cave is even blood-colored. There

is just enough environmental sound, of dripping, so that we feel the quiet in which these rocks exist (if it were silent we wouldn't be able to assume the silence was real). They are silent and still, we see nothing move, and just as this is dawning on us we begin to see some flies on the rock. As the number of closeups on flies increases, the sound of flies buzzing is also increased to a roar, which seems to be a subtly manipulated audio effect.

The implication of the flies is twofold; because we know flies are drawn to living things and to flesh, they further confuse the identify of what we're looking at. And because the elements of the tape at this point have been so simplified, one makes equations -- we know that in the cave the only thing moving had been the camera, and now there is one other thing moving; the flies. So for a moment we feel that we are like flies, fascinated by or feeding on the flesh of that which is pinned down for investigation by the camera.

While maintaining a close focus on the flies, the camera then moves to another shot of flies, which Nash says is the beginning of "Il Corpo Scuro (The Dark Body)." Here is what Nash says about the whole sequence:

> The expression of 'isness' in extended shots
> arrests duration away from the clock for the
> remainder of the tape. Mirage distortions locate

the creatures in a fluidity of being, grazing

contentedly as a thunderstorm approaches.

Here is what I saw. The flies are now picking at and

buzzing around an old carcass of a bison, which has been

half-devoured so that its skeleton is half-revealed. The

camera stays at a distance from the carcass in the next few

seconds, so that we see the natural context of the animal's

decomposition. The sound of the flies buzzing is peaceful

as we look at the sun-blurred grass and, soon, the other

bison grazing in the field. Then sudden cuts to silent and

very distant shots, in the style of postcards, of fields, of

soft blue mountain ranges. In seeing these the hum of the

"environmental" sound such as the wind, is always much

louder than the little clue sounds as to where we are

(little birds twittering, for instance).

Next, a long contemplative series of shots of the herds

of bison. Such shots are characteristic of his other work

in the feeling it gives to this kind of distance -- it is

organic, ironic, gentle -- there is a unity of the religious

and the intellectual in the camera's gaze. The feeling of

the video's mediation is made very palpable, Viola's

attention to the world takes over. This sequence seems like

a kind of natural history -- we see the herd, then

individual grazing patterns and various social groups of

bison. We see two standing nearby, parallel to the

perspective of the camera with the front bison slightly ahead of the rear bison, and the front one is urinating while the rear one stands still enough for two birds to land on its back. They are so still it is hard to tell that the image is moving, except for the slight sparkle of the sun on the stream of urine. Then the front animal moves and the camera remains still, so that the rear animal becomes the center of the image.

Sudden shift to another day -- sunny, the video looks different, close up on one bison's eye as he eats. The proximity of the camera to the big peaceful head as it eats makes its warmth and presence vivid. (In my notes, intending to write "warm sound of him eating," which is already a synaesthetic observation, I wrote "warm smell of him eating.") Then the camera pulls back as he goes on to another patch. Once he stops, stares at the camera, and continues.

A number of popular press reviews have praised these sequences -- the San Francisco Chronicle reviewer for this tape writes:

> [Viola] lets the critters themselves dictate the
> pace of the camera's observation, [h]is approach
> is the very opposite of conventional wildlife
> photography. Yet his camera work evokes better
> than any I've seen the mystery of animal and human

spontaneity.[59]

And indeed, we realize at this moment how <u>unaware</u> of the
camera all the animals have been, in comparison to the human
animal and its self-consciousness. A long, sustained
closeup on the eye of one of them, who gazes into the
distance, allows us several revolutions of thought. The
camera must be very unobtrusive, for Viola to be able to get
this close. The bison has a big eye and a thoughtful look.
And, after several seconds, we connect the gaze of the bison
to the gaze of the camera.

Sudden cut to what we learn later is a fire-walking
ritual in the Fiji Islands, in which men in ceremonial dress
are burning something and bathing in a river. Sudden cut
again to the beginning of the section Nash identifies as
"The Language of the Birds:"

> a series of numinous encounters with captive
> exotic birds and owls, with the cameraman's
> reflection gradually more apparent in the bird's
> eyes, a progressive union which culminates in a
> zoom into the riveting gaze of a horned owl.

The "language of the birds," is the kind of caption that
"supports the image," in videomaker Shuntaro Takiyama's
sense: it does not explain the image and thus deprive it of
its "power," or rather it does not "negate the ambiguity" of
the images.[60] And indeed, it is only after the accumulated

sense of Viola's exploration of the eyes of fish and birds
that one sees the reason for the word "language" to describe
sight.

The next section begins with a closeup of a strange
circular and rubbery thing, describable only as a diaphragm,
which turns out to be the eye of a big fish (who looks
dead). We hear the sounds of water, and the camera cuts to
another closeup, which is like a National Geographic shot or
a study for a science film, of another fish, the camera
focusing on the gills and the way the mouth opens to
breathe.

Cut to a bird series, for which the audio is a wet and
leafy sound; it could be at a zoo. At a certain point we
begin to realize the theme of study. All these animals have
a pathos to them -- they move and cock their heads and group
together and stare off into the distance much like humans
do, or at least that's the feeling one tends to project onto
what we watch. But this realization develops and
accumulates from observation, from an inarticulate sense of
the paradoxical consonance between the human eye and the
animal eye -- it is an experiential knowledge shared with us
through the videotape, so it is difficult to summarize;
we're seeing for ourselves what on paper we might accept but
not witness -- that life, death, and grazing and gazing, are
the main features of animals' lives just as they are

humans'. The fascination of the parallel lies in the
details, not in the concept. And Viola forces that kind of
attention to the details, because every split second of the
tape is so deliberate. Nash writes, about this sustained
gaze, that "...it convinces the viewer of his
intentionality, fixing attention on what might seem
superfluous until the re-vision takes place."[61]

An example is the owl sequence, the stills of which
represent the tape in promotional materials. It begins with
a medium shot of an owl staring directly into the camera,
which is medium distance away. Then very slowly the camera
zooms, while the owl continues to stare or, in what seems an
elaborately theatrical moment, turns its head away and then
looks back again straight at the camera. We see in this
dynamic the two main components of television drama; the
camera work and the performer. We see how dependent for
this effect we are on the zoom function of the camera, and
on the stillness of the owl which reads as character and
wisdom. He looks like, and even seems to allude to, a mafia
underlord. The zoom continues, getting so close that we
start seeing Bill Viola's reflection in the iris of the owl,
which takes up one third of the screen. At this point, the
owl paradoxically is distant once again, since we are seeing
Viola and a technological feat, not the owl.

The significance of this paradox is unclear -- it could

be a reminder to the viewer of the constructedness, the
personality, and the presence of the cameraman, it could be
a comment on the limits of seeing or on the limits of ever
more sophisticated lenses which can get microscopically
close to the world, it could express a philosophy of
perspective, or of the relationship between seer and seen.
But whether any of these single concepts independently
guided Viola toward preparing this moment or not, we realize
as all the possibilities crowd into our heads that they all
depend on the minutiae of seeing, on the way the moment, so
still and so mute, unfolded over time. The freshness and
the value of the moment of surprise and realization depends
upon the previous few minutes of uncertainty.

The glimpse of Viola at his camera also prefigures the
next section, "The Night of Sense," in which we see "the
scholar in his study," or Viola, now the observed, in his
office (his "natural habitat") reading under a desk light.
Immediately the fact that this sequence is performed, in
some sense, becomes apparent, in spite of its apparent
naturalism. Though bleak, the room is dramatically set: his
desk is orderly, the room is dark, he sits under a desk
light. Sound of a cat fight (a lonely sound). He looks up,
drinks a sip of coffee. Several expository shots of his
"natural habitat" show us that he works late (the clock says
3:30), that he is a scientist (we see diagrams of the human

anatomy, and "studies" of specimens on wooden tables: an egg, a rock, an unknown object which looks like a strange, tiny little gold ship.

Then we see Viola at work. He puts in a tape and watches something on a very small video monitor. We realize it's some of the footage of what we have just seen; we see some of the same images (the weird-eyed bird) and some different ones (a ceremony, with men dancing, probably connects to the tiny segment of men carrying fire into the river, earlier in the tape). While watching, Viola makes notes on a pad, watches more, forward winds. This is the arena in which images are manipulated.

Viola then goes to the kitchen, gets something to eat, a glass of water. Closeup on the faucet, and the reflection of Viola in it. Then closeup of the glass of water as it sits on the desktop and we wait for the air bubbles to clear. As they do, like magic the clear water reveals a miniature potted plant, which looks sort of like a bonsai tree, entirely framed by the glass, which seems to sit just behind the glass. This is the first instance of what will turn out to be a series of visual tricks, of inversions of the "natural" perception we have become accustomed to in the nature section. But the darkness of the room and the archetype Viola presents himself as (human as thinking being) suggests that night, and thought, and dream, and art

all *invert the real.*

And then, as if to remind us that the real inverts art, we cut to a photographic still-life which obviously references the tradition of still-life painting -- it has a recognizeably conventional arrangement of a fish on a silver platter, a crusty loaf of bread, a crystal decanter full of wine and a crystal glass, autumn vegetables surrounding it. Then we see a sequence in which Viola sits down to consume the meal. He eats the fish -- we see extreme closeups of his knife cutting into the cooked flesh of the fish, we hear him chewing it, and washing it down with a sip of the wine, we hear him breathing and pinching the bread and chewing it. The sounds of his consumption are hyperreal and visceral, part of the intimacy of his style, his attention to detail, but it also reasserts the thing itself, the literal consumption of the meal over and beyond the "idea" which surfaces easily (consumption of art). This is what binds the human once again to the animal, to the cycle of mortality. The camera even pays minute attention to the bread expand again after he's pinched a piece off, to the carcass of the fish Viola has eaten.

Back to the late night visual tricks, which include a real live snail crawling out of the above-mentioned little gold boat, an egg hatching, and an elephant trunk swooping in out of the dark room to pick up Viola's coffee mug. In

this sequence, Michael Nash observes the "diminution of natural scale," the exploration of "microcosmic mysteries (such as the snail) " which "question orderly appearance," the "sacramental ritual" of the scholar eating the fish, and the "whimsical" surprise appearance of the elephant which he sees as "playing off the magical myopia of cinematic convention's tunnel vision, and dismissing the scholar's reality lock." But all these apparently disparate themes are, for this spectator, part of a larger possibility.

The diminution of natural scale, to begin with, is complemented by a magnification of natural scale (or the microcosmic mysteries Nash refers to). And both of these are scholarly activities: the reduction of the images to the tiny video screen, from which Viola is taking notes, is connected by the theme of the scholar and the "frame" of the desk to the enlargement of images, on our own screen, of tiny creatures: the chick which is born from the egg, the snail whose movement becomes dramatic and eloquent through our elaborate attention to it, the closeup on the waterdrops after Viola drinks from his glass. All the elements of the world we have just been seeing, in the first two sections, are transformed inside the "scholar's reality lock" by the activity of research, exploration, attention, ritual.

This kind of transformation has many levels. The life of the chick, for instance, is in a sense permanently

altered by the fact of being born in front of the camera.
The consumption of one animal by another (the fish by the
human), which alludes to the more primal devouring of the
bison corpse seen in section I, is conceptually transformed
by the "ritual" suggested both by the sacramental elements
of his eating and by the allusion to still-life: it
transforms the experience of eating by detaching the fish
from its natural habitat and attaching it to the realm of
the "civilized," art history.

Next section, "Stunned by the Drum," begins in
darkness. Dark field, distant lights on its horizon, green
grass revealed by that light. Pixillated slow motion of a
mean German shepherd galloping toward the camera. The sound
is a primal roar of slow-motion audio, which is unique I
think to video editing equipment. As the dog reaches the
camera the audio begins a heartbeat-like sound, while the
video starts flashing snapshots and white flashes in double
time to the heartbeat -- first rabid dogs leaping at the
camera, then an increasingly disparate montage of images:
eyes, fire, fields, same fields we've seen, garbage fires,
boulders in fields; is this all the footage he didn't use?
It's beautiful. These are the attentive thoughts Viola has
trained us to have in the previous section, the scholarly
taxonomic consciousness of "The Night of Sense" sequence.
Nash describes it better:

...a German shepherd attacks the camera,

precipitating a heartbeat-driven sequence of

flashed images. Like a drowning person's life

passing before him/her, this blitz of TV news,

home movies, domesticated animals, fire,

landscapes and images from the drowning scene,

decomposes into a pulse of stroboscoping black and

white, the polarities of seeing and being.[62]

Then the white flashes slow down to fall in with the rhythm
of the heartbeat, then they steady, as the screen fades up
into the ceremony with which the entire video began. This
section, according to Nash a record of a Hindu fire-walking
ritual in Fiji, is titled "The Living Flame."

As the ceremony, which I thought would be a coda,
continues, (to the heavy drums and chanting) one thinks:
strict formal composition, closure. Even before one sees
the ceremonial dancers handling fire and walking over fire
it is clear that we are now in another part of the world,
where human beings test the limits of their own senses and
spirituality in a very different way than Viola's (Western)
scholar in his study. This is the message of the
intoxicating rhythm of the ceremonial music and the ecstasy
obvious on the dancers' faces, magnified by slow motion. If
used merely as an envelope for the rest of the tape, it
would have this significance.

But it turns out to be a long segment. The ceremony
continues, and as it does one begins to wonder: is <u>this</u> the
heart of it? Is the whole video a response to his
experience of this ceremony? It turns out to be just this,
in a sense, according to Nash' account and his later
interview with Viola. Nash says

> The ecstatic transcendence of fire through
> collectively willed suspension of doubt and fear
> exemplifies the bonding of inner states and
> external reality that Viola seeks.

It feels like a documentary, as the camera captures, in slow
motion, men preparing (we discover later) for a ceremonial
performance. Men are practicing to eat fire, walk across
hot coals, holding flames in their hands, piercing
themselves with little white spears through their noses,
lips, ears, cheeks, chests, backs, arms. They don't appear
to feel the pain of the piercing. Many have flowers in
their mouths. They all look ecstatic and numb to the pain,
though the slow motion may be artificially creating that
impression. Cut to a shimmering, smoldering field of ashes.
Now comes the ceremonial dance in the town square, for which
we have seen the preparations. It turns out to be a series
of more or less brave runs over the hot coals, slower or
faster, one carrying a young girl. We see that it is all a
kind of demonstration of ecstasy and faith, a kind of

catharsis for the village.

To interpret the thematic significance of the fire-walking sequence, Nash brings in Andrew Weil's argument that the trance, induced by the drumming and chanting, protects the fire-walker from fear and allows him

> to enter into a mind-body balance and electrochemically transmute thermal energy away from the peripheral nervous system into the central nervous system, pain thus becoming a euphoric high.[63]

Fire-walking, which is an acceptance of death and of risk, thus induces a serenity which, Nash says, is akin to Piaget's "reversibility thinking:" the ability to consider as equivalent experiences along a whole continuum of possibility. To Nash, the fire-walking is the "resolution" the tape seeks, that which faces death and sees the rebirth in it. To the question of whether this was an intentional theme in the tape, Viola himself responds differently; not that the fire-walking resolves the formal issues or the narrative structure of the video, but that it represents a kind of mastery of mind and will that is achieved through action rather than thinking.

> Initiation rites and age-old spiritual training ordeals (fire-walking, days of continuous dancing, circumcision rituals, holy torture, etc.) are all

> controlled, staged accidents, ancient technologies
>
> designed to bring the organism to a life-
>
> threatening crisis state.[64]

But even the clarity of this theme is exceeded or crossed by
the sensual excess of Viola's own presence in the images he
records, which refuses categorization. J. Hoberman writes
that in the "Night of Sense" section

> Viola turns himself into a creature as well. He's
>
> first glimpsed reflected in the pulsating pupil of an
>
> owl's eye and then seen at his desk, taking notes as he
>
> studies his footage on a tiny TV monitor. There's a
>
> baroque gloom to the artist's midnight repast -- a
>
> still life of flasks, fish, onions, bread -- rendered
>
> unexpectedly violent by super close-ups of his knife
>
> and fork gently dissecting the fish.[65]

If he is the Thinker in the tape, he is also a kind of
participant in the scene: he was reflected in the owl's
eyes, and his presence at the ritual is expressed in the
looseness and sensuality of his camerawork -- the camera
lingers for instance on the kind smooth brown back of a man
gently piercing his friend's chest with another nipple.
There is also chaos; one man is crying, another is on his
knees, praying. The slow motion is expressive of the
cameraman's involvement with the sheer sensuality of it.

    The last sequence is strange, and Nash interprets it,

perhaps correctly, as a kind of Catholic symbolism. We cut
to the sound of being underwater. What follows is a
sequence in which the camera lifts a fish out of the water
and seems to be hang-gliding with it mounted before the
camera over a lake in the mountains. Thus the "sacramental"
fish, (it is identical to that which was consumed in the
ritualistic dinner in the third section) is, in Nash' words,
"flying like none of the captive birds did. The fish
triumphs over its form for a moment before the inevitable
descent and decomposition."[66] Its descent is a slow,
careful lowering of the fish, still mounted before the
camera, into the pine trees and then down to what seems like
a nice soft forest floor (one wonders, as one often wonders
in Viola's tapes, how is this done?) where it comes to rest
in the grass, again part of nature. What's notable is the
extreme falsity of this image -- the fish looks like it's
plastic, and it's almost funny to see a camera attempting to
have a fish fly. What is striking about this final image is
not that the fish flies as none of the birds did, but rather
that the camera, trying to make art, (the fish does allude
to art history since, as we have said, it resembles the fish
used in the still-life) exposes at this final moment the
very artifice of the kind of symbolic meaning which has been
building in the tape suggested.[67]

Then the music fades out, sounds of wind and flies fade

in again. The fish in front of the camera becomes real all

of a sudden, in this context. Flies start buzzing on it. A

deer comes into view a few feet away, a bird, then a few

more, lands on the ground near the fish and begins picking

at it. Time passes, the flies get louder, a series of

dissolves shows how the fish is gradually eaten away to a

bone, over time. Thunderstorm sound, nighttime, rain, fish

bones left in the dark, next day they are almost invisible,

and seem to have blended into the grass. End. Title again,

in which the source of the phrase "I do not know what it is

I am like" is given: the Rig Veda 1.164.

V. Conclusion

What the development of the kinetic, visual
technologies of film and video have changed is the
materiality of seeing. For the first time, the way we see
is recordable, and does not depend for transcription on a
special craft. What this means is that now, like
performance, the act of seeing has a body, and seeing is
revealed as bodied. While the body of the camera has
exceeded the limits of the physical, human body, and the
abstractions of the image can just as easily remove that
seeing from the domain of ordinary perception, the cultural
function of the technologies of seeing cannot be deciphered
without a theory of the body's place in seeing.

The televisual text is increasingly the site of efforts
in the humanities and the social sciences to grasp the
performative, kinetic, dialogic nature of language. In a
sense, because few of those efforts acknowledge or describe
the significance of an actual performance praxis, the media
has become a barrier between those in our field who maintain
that it is the live performance, and the investment in the
body as a site of knowing, that consitutes a genuine
performance, and those in literature and philosophy who
acknowledge the new importance of performance only as it has

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manifested itself in the media.

The problem with the connection between performance and seeing is that it is generally tacit, rather than explicit. We all watch and interpret performances of all kinds on television, without a language to describe what they mean. And meanwhile, as Raymond Williams has argued, "Beyond what many people can see as the theatricality of our image-conscious public world, there is a more serious, more effective, more deeply rooted drama: the dramatisation of consciousness itself."[1] As television has dramatized society and consciousness, Williams argues that increasingly "...drama, in quite new ways, is built into the rhythms of everyday life...."[2] As a result, he says, the conventions of television drama have come to dominate our everyday life. Though Williams' causal structure here is oriented in literary drama and overlooks, for instance, Victor Turner's model of the social drama, which uncovered the roots and not the result of conventional dramatic structures, he is attempting to express a new shape of everyday performance culture which is partially related to televisual forms.

This insight must be carried further to a specific understanding of the specific modes of dramatic consciousness. Fiske may be right in insisting on the essential indeterminacy of the televisual material, whose final meaning is dependent on the viewer, and Colin MacCabe

may also be right in insisting that such "resistance" is quiescent, as long as it is enclosed in conventional forms. Their debate over the political valence of aesthetic forms is an important one philosophically and theoretically. But the _effect_ of such protracted theoretical debate is to overlook the actual attempts to use video differently -- the extra institutional work of experimental video makers who are actually _exploring_ the ways in which we relate to the medium and the potential for standing critically and creatively outside of the dominant idioms of mainstream television and the ideologies they disseminate.

What I have tried to argue, in the last three chapters, is that contemporary theory is mistaken in considering experimental video irrelevant to the problematic of meaning in a postmodern televisual culture, and that what Benjamin, Bakhtin, and Barthes offer, alongside their various endorsements of the democratic and destabilizing effects of popular and mass culture, are ways of _seeing_ that recuperate and resituate meaning. The kind of seeing all three articulate, when it attends to the fragments of "reality" served up by the new media, is experiential, historical, processual, and fundamentally mediated by a critical attention to the social. It does not submit itself to the logic of commercial culture, but rather sees in the media it dominates, new possibilities for a popular and progressive

aesthetic, and works towards understanding what that aesthetic could be. All three, in their variety, touch on or exemplify a kind of intensified seeing which would re-educate us in the relationship between culture and lived experience.

A connection remains to be made between those who consider video paradigmatic of postmodernism, and those who consider performance to be so. One of the reasons performance remains marginalized in the discourse of cultural theory despite an increasing decentralization of literature and of the written text, despite Ong's and McLuhan's identification of a "secondary orality," despite Derrida's critique of logocentrism and the new performative sense of linguistic play in philosophy and literary theory, is that the new technologies of photography, film, and video themselves have obscured it. The focus on the new technologies of seeing has extended the abstraction of language theory into theories of the visual. Theories of popular culture have focused most often on the image's displacement of the word, rather than on the new performative, transactional kind of seeing that the new, kinetic media has enabled.

Hal Foster acknowledges that the exclusion of the body from postmodern discourse has been a mistake -- that when Benjamin wrote in his endlessly quoted "The Work of Art in

the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" essay that mechanical reproduction destroys aura by contracting distance, he meant that it impacted the body as well as the image; the two cannot be separated. But even Walter Benjamin, who sensed the new relationship of the body to the mechanically reproduced image, and the significance of flâneur's wandering seeing, overlooked the role of the body in the technology of the camera. Introducing photography, he writes only:

> For the first time in the process of pictorial
> reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most
> important artistic functions which henceforth devolved
> only upon the eye looking into a lens.[3]

Benjamin's sense of the photographer as a static eye and a single finger depressing a shutter is itself historically conditioned, based on physical and representational conventions of photography in the first two decades of the century and based also on the limitations of the medium at the time. Benjamin could not have predicted the contemporary range of camera angles we take for granted, the intrusive and the distorted. Thus, not being conscious of that possibility, Benjamin notes the decreased dexterity demanded of the artist's hand without noting in turn the increased physical mobility and lucidity, or consciousness of movement and light, required in the positioning and the

capture of an image made by a photographer. And still, Jameson describes television and video art as if there were no body there.

Part of the reason, of course, is that he is predominantly a literary critic and concerned with the materiality of language. He confidently distinguishes the "essentially" linguistic from the sensory, the mind from the body, noting by way of example that Roland Barthes' sense of the physicality of language (The Pleasure of the Text) is not a linguistic sense at all, but a purely physical, animalistic sense.[4]

Meanwhile the new embodiment of the seer, which is always implied in a camera image of any kind, has led to a gradual deemphasis on "pure vision," as Rosalind Krauss describes the main dream of modern art, and a reemphasis on the inscription of body and sound in the contemporary "lexicon" of image culture, in film theories such as those of Gilles Deleuze[5] and Vivien Sobchak,[6] who have destabilized the subject/object distinction in language and image discourse in favor of a theory of film's "body," and the new physiology of the "movement-image." In general, however, the "Debordian" of image theory continues to dominate cultural theory of the postmodern,[7] and it is image, and its relationship to language, which has been the focus of most interdisciplinary work on the new "sensorium."

Williams goes on to describe a deeper concept of drama
as a mode of handling the increasingly complex and
increasingly "unknowable" world. Thus he acknowledges the
power of drama to shape our experience and suggests that
against television drama's power to shape consciousness we
reactivate the "specific, active, interactive" aspect of
drama:

> We need to see this especially now, when myth and
>
> ritual, in their ordinary senses, have been broken up
>
> by historical development, when they are little more,
>
> in fact, than the nostalgia or the rhetoric of one kind
>
> of scholar and thinker, and yet when the basic social
>
> processes, of presentation, representation,
>
> signification have never been more important.[8]

If there were some corresponding work validating and
examining the dynamics of video work which actively engages
or explores a more vital relationship between performing
producer and audience, we might learn more precisely what it
is on television that either chains us or seduces or simply
engages us.   So far, that question seems to be interesting
mainly to market researchers and sociologists. Performance
theorists have generally turned their backs on the
dematerialized, commodified, commercial mediation of live
performance that the "culture industry" represents. Though

no definition of performance excludes television or video, performance theory has avoided focusing on television and video except as it records or is incorporated into performance. It is hardly mentioned in the recent anthology Critical Theory and Performance, despite the editors' claim that performance studies endorses the ethnographer's faith in the dynamic, adaptive, and interactive characteristics of the postmodern culture.[9] Richard Schechner, the only one to mention it, calls television a "second theater," parasitic on the "direct theater" of political action and mass demonstration and carnival. Television news, he tells us, is not polysemous but hegemonic; it "gives the impression of -- a performance of -- 'multivocality.' But... television... knit[s] the many voices of the streets into a unitary broadcast."[10] Johannes Birringer, in Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism, doesn't think that the authenticity of performance can survive in television but rather that theater, in danger of dying out, must acknowledge and incorporate the changing subjectivity brought on by "the dematerializing and dehumanizing effects" of video and other postmodern technology.[11] In other words, the argument is, don't bring performance theory into the media, bring media theory into performance.

Only the performative praxis of experimental video has examined and/or foregrounded the relationship of the medium

of video to subjectivity, to performance, and to representations of the body. Since its beginnings in the midst of the multimedia performance art of the 60s, experimental video has explored the parameters of behavior and performance as they determine, and are modified by, video, as well as the liveness, presentness, and performativity of the medium itself. These experiments in kinetic representation are exploring, rather than dictating, both the new "structures of feeling" and the alleys between them -- experimental videomakers keep showing us openings in the medium that Fredric Jameson can't see. Video art has used, interrogated, and exhibited the possibilities of both plaisir and jouissance more critically and productively than any passive audience member, simply enjoying "popular pleasures," can.

But postmodernism must recognize the performative in order to see how such work constitutes new, effective critiques of representation in the age of media. The meaning of performance lies in its reception, in its articulated interpretation, which is why the abandonment of the project of interpretation by postmodern theory is unacceptable. And postmodern theory, in ruling out both the media's potential to renew itself and the modernist praxis of video art which still attempts social critique through aesthetic praxis, threatens to deprive a future

generation of the ability to critique a whole new "language."

Access to and understanding of video is important not just because it is a communication tool, but because it works the way performance works -- it enables a greater self-understanding and an identification -- or, as Kenneth Burke says, a "naming" of a situation which could otherwise not be named.[12] I would call for more attention to media texts as texts of analysis for performance scholars. Performance theory is ideally situated to understand and to articulate our kinetic responses to the television. In the act of performing a text, any text, we learn not only more about the text, we also learn about the language of performance -- to what extent we can control the voice of a speaker or the meaning of a metaphor. As a result we have a great sensitivity to all performances, including those chosen, mediated, and framed by film and television -- which would illuminate a largely undescribed dimension of meaning in those texts.

A performance theory of video cannot attempt to match the performative nature of video or television to live performance. The value of a performative theory of video is, rather, that it provides a mode of knowing which is particularly valuable in postmodernism, and as Richard Shechner has said,

...on situations where descriptive definitions are so
open as to be inoperative as criteria for exclusion,
one must seek relational definitions.... [which are]
self-generating and flexible. Taking a relational
point of view makes it possible to understand theatre
as something more inclusive than literature, acting,
and directing."[13]

Unless performance studies is to remain in a strictly
Grotowskian consciousness about the live activity of
performance, which would unnecessarily limit the explanatory
power of its particular synthesis of knowing and doing, it
must recognize the negation of performance, the absence of
presence, in the televisual, as part of its territory. For
if humans perform, they also do not perform, hide from
performing, substitute for performing.

Notes and References

Chapter I. Introduction and Background

[1]Patrick Brantlinger provides a helpful account of the Frankfurt School's theories and influence and their relevance to television in chapters 7 and 8 of Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983) 223-277.

[2]Brantlinger, Bread 250.

[3]Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "The Frozen Imagination: Adorno's Theory of Mass Culture Revisited," Thesis Eleven 34 (1993).

[4]Hal Foster, "Postmodernism in Parallax," October 63, (1993) 3-20.

[5]Foster, "Postmodernism" 5.

[6]Foster, "Postmodernism" 6.

[7]Judith Barry, "This Is Not A Paradox," Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer ([New York]: Aperture and Bay Area Coalition, [1990]) 250.

[8]Among those who have critiqued this tendency of the Left, Hans Magnus Enzensberger argues that "the New Left of the sixties has reduced the development of the media to a single concept -- that of manipulation" and observes that "...behind the tendency to go on the defensive lies a sense of impotence" ("Constituents of a Theory of the Media," Video Culture: A Critical Investigation, ed. John G. Hanhardt [Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1987] 101). Also, William Boddy points out that the apolitical or "postpolitical" nature of early "video guerilla's" technological euphoria and utopianism has made their struggle to disempower and decentralize commercial broadcast television futile, leaving existing power relations intact.
The rhetorical similarities between the technological visions of some video guerrillas and the entrepreneurs of the booming cable industry of the 1970s seem disquieting in retrospect. The wishful thinking about the autonomy of technology and the refusal of history and politics among independent video makers may have inadvertently enlisted them as the avant garde for an (un)reconstructed communications industry only too

happy to lead a 'media revolution' which would leave existing power relations untouched ("Alternative Television in the United States" <u>Screen</u> 31 [1990]: 95).

[9]The above mentioned anthology of recent critical writing on experimental video, <u>Illuminating Video</u>, contains a very broad and eclectic range of thoughts about video. Though a useful resource which contains some valuable theoretical formulations, it is eclectic and tends, like much writing on video toward the missionary rather than the critical.

[10]Gregory Ulmer's term for video literacy, in <u>Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video</u> (New York: Routledge, 1989).

[11]Hohendahl, "The Frozen Imagination" 17-41.

[12]Deirdre Boyle suggests that the scramble for funding split ranks -- see "A Brief History of American Documentary Video," <u>Illuminating Video</u> 51-70.

[13]I am grateful to Dwight Conquergood for suggesting this phrase.

[14]Jon P. Baggaley and Steven W. Duck, "Hall of Mirrors," <u>Transmission: Theory and Practice for a New Television Aesthetics</u>, ed. Peter D'Agostino (New York: Tanam P, 1985) 14.

[15]Gene Youngblood argues that video is part of an "expanded cinema" in "Metaphysical Structuralism: The Videotapes of Bill Viola," notes for videodisc edition of <u>Bill Viola: Selected Works</u> (Los Angeles: Voyager Press, 1987) 1.

[16]Jameson's classification of video as the "cultural dominant" of the late capitalist postmodern world is discussed at length in chapter two.

[17]Henry Sayre places video among the arts turning toward the performative in <u>The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970</u> (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989).

[18]See Marjorie Perloff, <u>Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media</u> (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991).

[19]Marita Sturken describes video's preoccupation with its own history in "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of A History," Illuminating Video 101-121. Bill Vicla writes "Video may be the only art from ever to have a history before it had a history. Video was being invented, and simultaneously so were its myths and culture heroes." ("History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime," Video: A Retrospective, ed. Kathy Rae Huffman [Long Beach: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1984] 19).

[20]Martha Rosler writes:
> The elements of the myth thus include an Eastern visitor from a country ravaged by war (our war) inoculated by the leading U.S. avant-garde master (John Cage) while in technology heaven (Germany) who once in the States repeatedly violated the central shrine, TV, and then goes to face the representative of God on earth, capturing his image to bring to the avant-garde....("Shedding the Utopian Moment," Illuminating Video 45).

[21]Gregory Battcock argues that video's development as an art form could not occur until the medium became "portable." (introduction, New Artists Video, ed. Gregory Battcock [(New York: Dutton, 1978)] xxii.

[22]Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968) 1-15.

[23]Describing the first television broadcast from the Alexandra Palace in London in 1936, which featured a film explaining the behind-the-scenes secrets of television, John Baggaley and Stephen Duck comment on the short-lived innocence of the early excitement over television; the "relative artlessness of television's own projection styles at that time represented a translucency that was soon to be lost as the art became more sophisticated." ("Hall of Mirrors," Transmission 14).

[24]Poggioli 11.

[25]Sayre 20.

[26]Rosler, "Shedding" 31.

[27]An early essay by David Antin defining video art argues that "if anything has defined the formal and technical properties of the video medium, it is the television industry" ("Video: The Distinctive Features of

the Medium," <u>Video Art</u>, comp. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot [New York: Harcourt, 1976], rpt. in <u>Video Culture</u> 149).

[28]Martha Rosler describes Pop as "a public and ritualized acceptance of the power of mass culture," and Warhol's Pop as a "'confession' of powerlessness," ("Shedding" 41).

[29]Deirdre Boyle, "A Brief History of American Documentary," <u>Illuminating Video</u> 56.

[30]Wayne Booth, "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism," <u>Critical Inquiry</u> 9 (1982) 46-47.

[31]See Jim Collins on this problem in "Television and Postmodernism," <u>Channels of Discourse, Reassembled</u>, ed. Robert C. Allen, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1992) 327-53.

[32]Raymond Williams, <u>Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings</u>, ed. Alan O'Connor (London: Routledge, 1989) 4.

[33]Avital Ronnell, "Haunted TV: Rodney King/Video/Trauma" <u>ArtForum</u> Sept. 1992 71.

[34]In 1976, Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot identified three basic approaches to the video image as of 1976: 1) where the artist/performer is subject, 2) where the environment is subject, and 3) where the abstract synthesized image is subject (introduction, <u>Video Art: An Anthology</u>, comp. and ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, man. ed. Mary Lucier [New York: Harcourt, 1976]). In 1977, Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons identify three main and often conflicting approaches to video by video artists: political, imagist, and conceptual (introduction, "Television and Art: A Historical Primer," in <u>The New Television: A Public/Private Art</u>, ed. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons, based on "Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television." [Cambridge: MIT P, 1977] 2). In 1980, John Hanhardt writes that he considers three features common to video art in the period 1967-1980: "its collaboration with the other arts, its involvement with political and ideological debates, and its intentional distinction from commercial television." (John Hanhardt, Exhibition Flier, "New American Video Art: A Historical Survey, 1967-1980," [New York: The New American Filmmakers Series, Whitney Museum of American Art, June 13 - July 1,

1984, n. p.]). In 1984, Joyce Bolinger identifies three main "remarkably consistent" ideas with which video artists have been concerned: "(1) randomness, spontaneity; (2) interactive, anti-TV/"global village;" (3) formal investigation v. expressionism" (Joyce Bolinger, "A History of Experimental Video: 1963-1983," masters thesis, Northwestern U, 1984, 4).

[35]Henry Sayre cites Dick Higgins' description of Fluxus as a "strangely diverse group of artists from disparate origins and disparate ages...unbound by a coherent ideology," and based on a principle of interaction among and between the arts: "One key assumption of fluxus works is that there are close analogies among things.... Projected onto the aesthetics of art (and of course not all aesthetics are the aesthetics of art) and viewed from this perspective, the behavior of the different arts (including the art of thought, philosophy) is sufficiently close that these are properly seen as media, with the ground between such media, then, the inter-media" ("A Child's History of Fluxus," in Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of Intermedia [Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984] 87, qtd. in Sayre 282).

[36]Peter Bürger, Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School (U Wisconsin P, 1989) 70-71.

[37]Peter Bürger, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw, (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1984) 67.

[38]Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthoood," Artforum 5 (1967), rpt. in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968).

[39]Dick Higgins, " A Child's History of Fluxus," in Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of Intermedia (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984) 87.

[40]Ulmer, Teletheory 144.

[41]This is a paraphrase of Rose Lee Goldberg's summary in Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present (New York: Abrams, 1988) 123-24.

[42]"Indeterminacy" is the title of a long collection of stories in John Cage's Silence: Lectures and Notes (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1961) 261-73.

[43]Rosler, "Shedding" 46.

[44]Rosler, "Shedding" 46.

[45]Marjorie Perloff associates it with Baudelaire's: "The whole visible universe is but a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value; it is a sort of fodder which the imagination must digest or transform." ("Salon de 1859, oeuvres complètes, ed. Y. G. Le Dantec et revisée par Claude Pichois [Paris: Bibliothèque de al Pléiade, 1968], 1044, trans. and qtd. in Marjorie Perloff, Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage [Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1981] 27).

[46]Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New (New York: Knopf, 1991) 334.

[47]Gregory Battcock, "Introduction" Idea Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973) 6.

[48]Barbara Haskell writes "For Cage, the world itself was a work of art: he saw the aesthetic potential in the commonplace...." in Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance, 1958-1964 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984) 31.

[49]John Cage, Silence 12.

[50]Jacques Derrida, L'Ecriture ou la Différence (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967) 432-33, trans. and qtd. in Michel Benamou, "Presence and Play," Performance in Postmodern Culture, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Madison: Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Madison-Milwaukee and Coda Press, 1977) 5.

[51]For the sake of illustration, here is Rose Lee Goldberg's description of the event:

> Having decided that it was time to "increase the 'responsibility' of the observer," Kaprow issued invitations that included the statement 'you will become a part of the happenings; you will simultaneously experience them'. Shortly after this first announcement, some of the same people who had been invited received mysterious plastic envelopes containing bits of paper, photographs, wood, painted fragments and cut-out figures. They were also given a vague idea of what to expect: 'there are three rooms for this work, each different in size and feeling....

Some guests will also act.

Those who came to the Reuben Gallery found a
second-floor loft with divided plastic walls. In the
three rooms thus created, chairs were arranged in
circles and rectangles forcing the visitors to face in
different directions. Coloured lights were strung
through the subdivided space; a slatted construction in
the third room concealed the 'control room' from which
performers would enter and exit. Full-length mirrors
in the first and second rooms reflected the complex
environment. Each visitor was presented with a
programme and three small cards stapled together. 'The
performance is divided into six parts,' the notes
explained. 'Each part contains three happenings which
occur at once. The beginning and the end of each will
be signalled by a bell. At the end of the performance
two strokes of the bell will be heard.' Spectators
were warned to follow instructions carefully: during
parts one and two they may be seated in the second
room, during parts three and four they might move to
the first room, and so one, each time at the ring of a
bell. Intervals would be exactly two minutes long, and
two fifteen-minute intervals would separate the larger
sets. 'There will be no applause after each set, but
you may applaud after the sixth set if you wish.'

The visitors (whom the programme notes designated
as part of the cast) took their seats at the ring of a
bell. Loud amplified sounds announced the beginning of
the performance: figures marched stiffly in single file
down the narrow corridors between the makeshift rooms
and in one room a woman stood still for ten seconds,
left arm raised, forearm pointing to the floor. Slides
were shown in an adjacent room. Then two performers
read from hand-held placards: 'it is said that time is
essence... we have known time... spiritually...'; or in
another room: 'I was about to speak yesterday on a
subject most dear to you all --- art... but I was
unable to begin.' Flute, ukulele and violin were
played, painters painted on unprimed canvas set into
the walls, gramophones were rolled in on trolleys, and
finally, after ninety minutes of eighteen simultaneous
happenings, four nine-foot scrolls toppled off a
horizontal bar between the male and female performers
reciting monosyllabic words -- 'but...', 'well...'. As
promised, a bell rang twice signalling the end
(Performance Art 128-30).

[52]Richard Kostelantz, <u>The Theatre of Mixed Means: An introduction to happenings, kinetic environments, and other mixed-means performances</u> (New York: The Dial P, 1968) 5.

[53]Kostelantz 7.

[54]Among those early activities were a series of concerts organized at the Café A Gogo, Larry Poon's Epitome Café, and Yoko Ono's loft at 112 Chambers street in the first half of 1961, which brought together artists from San Francisco (friends of LaMonte Young's such as sculptors Robert Morris and Walter De Maria, and the dancer Simone Forti) and from New York (musicians Joseph Byrd and Richard Maxfield, dancer Robert Dunn, poet Jackson MacLow). Although the 1963 Yam Festival and Charlotte Moorman's Festival of the Avant Garde in New York included work by Fluxus artists, the first American "official Fluxus event" was organized by Maciunas when he returned to New York in the spring of 1964.

[55]See Allan Kaprow, <u>Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings</u> (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1967) 165-66.

[56]Haskell, <u>Blam!</u> 49.

[57]Lucy Lippard, <u>Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972</u> (New York: Praeger, 1973) 6.

[58]Yoko Ono, lecture at Wesleyan, January 1966, quoted by Lucy Lippard, <u>Six Years</u> 13.

[59]Haskell makes this point in <u>Blam!</u> 53.

[60]The main feature of a recent exhibition entitled "Fluxattitudes" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York: Fall 1992) was a table full of letters to the curators, about whether or how they would participate in the exhibit, many of them objecting to the usefulness of the label "Fluxus."

[61]Haskell, <u>Blam!</u> 59.

[62]Lippard, <u>Six Years</u> 5.

[63]Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," <u>Artforum</u>, summer, 1967.

[64]Joseph Kosuth (February, 1967), qtd. in Lucy Lippard, <u>Six Years</u> 24.

[65]Robert Pincus-Witten, "Bruce Nauman, Another Kind of Reasoning," Artforum Feb. 1972, rpt. in Robert Pincus-Witten, Postminimalism into Maximalism, Donald Kuspit's Studies in the Fine Arts: Criticism, No. 22 (Ann Arbor: UMI) 77-83.

[66]Bruce Nauman, [American Sculpture of the Sixties (Los Angeles County Museum, 1967)] qtd. in Pincus-Witten 78.

[67]Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983) 57-82.

[68]Yvonne Rainer, "Looking Myself in the Mouth," October 17 (1981) 67-68.

[69]Yvonne Rainer qtd. in Goldberg 141.

[70]Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others" 62-63. Henry Sayre, citing Owens, also thinks that feminist art practice may be the most significant element of the postmodern (Sayre 88).

[71]Coinage of the term is attributed to Lawrence Alloway, director of the Institute for Contemporary Art in London in the late 50s by Lucy Lippard in Pop Art (New York: Praeger, 1966).

[72]Lucy Lippard, Pop Art 9.

[73]Rosler, "Shedding" 41.

[74]Rosalind Krauss implies that in fact, pop art was the instigator of all that is postmodern when she says, "...as far as we are concerned there has been no 'after pop'; its terms, no matter how third-hand, no matter how degraded and sad, have been rehearsed and re-rehearsed throughout almost everything that has happened within dominant aesthetic practice in the past two decades." "Theories of Art After Minimalism and Pop," Discussions in Contemporary Culture: Number One, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press and Dia Art Foundation, 1987) 60.

[75]Max Kozloff, "Pop Culture, Metaphysical Disgust, and the New Vulgarians," Art International 6 (1962) 34-36.

[76]Kozloff, "Pop Culture" 34.

[77]Kozloff, "Pop Culture" 34.

[78]Kozloff, "Pop Culture" 35.

[79]Kozloff, "Pop Culture" 34.

[80]Kozloff, "Pop Culture" 35.

[81]Hughes, Shock 351.

[82]Hughes, Shock 356.

[83]Hughes, Shock 359.

[84]Hughes, Shock 356.

[85]Hughes, Shock 365.

[86]Walter Benjamin quotes Marinetti's manifesto on the Ethiopian cultural war, which exhorts "Poets and artists of Futurism!...remember these principles of an aesthetics of war so that your struggle for a new literature and a new graphic art...may be illumined by them!" This statement, Benjamin says, "has the virtue of clarity. Its formulations deserve to be accepted by dialecticians" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Illuminations, ed. and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968) 241-42.

[87]Robert Hughes writes elsewhere that the kind of life-threatening "body art" performed by artists such as Chris Burden "...is a vulgar frisson for the spectators, and unlikely to appeal to those who believe that art and life interact best at a distance from one another" ("The Decline and Fall of the Avant Garde," Idea Art 194).

[88]Hughes, Shock 359-62.

[89]Lippard, Pop Art 10.

[90]Hughes, Shock 348.

[91]Hughes, Shock 375.

[92]Rosalind Krauss "Theories of Art After Minimalism and Pop" 61.

[93]Sayre 15.

[94]Sayre 33.

[95]Paul De Man, _Allegories of Reading_ (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 242.

[96]Accordingly, Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleagues have been placed structurally on the Right, as George Friedman does in _The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School_ (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 32.

[97]According to numerous commentators on the ideas circulating among video artists in the 1960s and 1970s, one of the "bibles" of the early guerilla video movement was Michael Shamberg and the Raindance Corporation's _Guerilla Television_ (New York: Holt, 1971), which described television as the antithesis of enlightenment, and the job of independent video as the decentralization of that monolith.

[98]Rosler, "Shedding" 44.

[99]To a questionnaire solicited by _Art Com_ about the role of the artist in television, Willoughby Sharp responded: "...it is imperative that artists today turn their attention to intelligent machines. Artists, especially in the 80's, have a social responsibility which includes examining the general area of problem solving" ("Populism," _Art Com_ 20 [1983] 24). John Sturgeon criticizes the "elitism" of those who refuse to enter into the mass media: "To refuse to embrace the spirit of the times, to withhold the expertise, while clinging to an archaic, sentimental and ego-centered definition of art and artist's roles, would be an arrogance that spiritually and morally is unaffordable" ("Populism," 40).

[100]David A. Ross, "Nam June Paik's Videotapes," _Transmission_ 156.

[101]See Deirdre Boyle's history of the rise and fall of guerrilla television in "Guerrilla Television," _Transmission_ 203-13.

[102]Ross, "Paik" 159.

[103]David Ross sees in Paik's work a persistent effort to "get deeper and deeper into the core of the apparatus (technically, ideologically, spiritually)" ("Paik" 152).

[104]See Ross, "Paik" 151-55.

[105]Nam June Paik, interview with Russell Connor and Calvin Tompkins, in "Nam June Paik: Edited for Television," WNET-TV, 1975, qtd. in Ross, "Paik" 152.

[106]Ulmer, Teletheory 148.

[107]In 1981, Cage wrote: "We know the air is filled with vibrations that we can't hear. In Variations VI, I tried to use sounds from that inaudible environment. But we can't consider the environment as an object. We know that it's a process. While in the case of the ashtray, we are indeed dealing with an object. It would be extremely interesting to place it in a little anechoic chamber and to listen to it through a suitable sound system. Object would become process; we would discover, thanks to a procedure borrowed from science, the meaning of nature through the music of objects. From For the Birds (Boston: Boyars Press, 1981) 221.

[108]Thus, Adorno's estimation of Schönberg lessened when his twelve-tone system began to be codified, and thus "hypostatized," by his followers. See his article the composer in Prisms, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT, 1981) 149-72.

Chapter II. Marxism and Media Theory

[1]Enzensberger, "Consituents of A Theory of the Media" 98.

[2]Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972) 338.

[3]Max Horkheimer, The Eclipse of Reason (New York: Oxford UP, 1947).

[4]See Martin Jay's comprehensive account in The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950 (Boston: Little, 1973).

[5]Jay, Dialectical 175; 178-82.

[6]Jay, Dialectical 177.

[7]Patrick Brantlinger, Bread 227.

[8]Adorno and Horkheimer write that in the culture industry "The reconciliation of the general and the particular, of the rule and the specific demands of the subject matter, the achievement of which alone gives essential, meaningful content to style, is futile because there has ceased to be the slightest tension between opposite poles: these concordant extremes are dismally identical; the general can replace the particular and vice versa" (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming [1944; New York: Continuum, 1972] 130).

[9]Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry Reconsidered," New German Critique 6 (1975) 6, rpt. in Patrick Brantlinger, Bread 227.

[10] Adorno, Prisms 225.

[11]Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

[12]Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic 9.

[13]For complex reworkings of Adorno's ideas of difference and negativity see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "The Frozen Imagination: Adorno's Theory of Mass Culture Revisited," Thesis Eleven 34 (1993) 17-41; and John Caughie, "Adorno's Reproach: Repetition, Difference, and Television Genre," Screen 32.2 (1991) 127-53.

[14]Adorno wrote, in a critique of Thorsten Veblen's attack on conspicuous consumption, that "The happiness that man actually finds... cannot be separated from conspicuous consumption" (Prisms 87).

[15]Herbert Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation (Boston: Beacon, 1969).

[16]Adorno wrote: "Television aims at a synthesis of radio and film... but its consequences will be quite enormous and promise to intensify the impoverishment of aesthetic matter so drastically, that by tomorrow the thinly veiled identity of all industrial culture products can come triumphantly out into the open, derisively fufilling the Wagnerian dream of the Gesamtkunstwerk -- the fusion of all the arts in one work. The alliance of word, image, and music is all the more perfect than in Tristan because the

sensuous elements which all approvingly reflect the surface
of social reality are in principle embodied in the same
technial process, the unity of which becomes its distinctive
content" (Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic 124).

[17]Adorno, Prisms 84.

[18]Enzensberger 113.

[19]Enzensberger 97.

[20]Enzensberger 105.

[21]Enzensberger 102.

[22]Enzensberger 114.

[23]Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art
Form," Illuminating Video 107.

[24]Enzensberger 103.

[25]Enzensberger 115.

[26]Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic 127.

[27]Enzensberger 106.

[28]Enzensberger 115.

[29]See Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter
Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno Aesthetics and Politics, trans.
ed. Ronald Taylor (1977; London: Verso, 1980).

[30]See Bloch et al., Aesthetics and Politics 12.

[31]Horkheimer and Adorno write: "The old experience of
the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension
of the film he has just left... is now the producer's
guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques
duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the
illusion to prevail that the outside world is the
straightforward continuation of that presented on the
screen" (Dialectic 126).

[32]Antony Easthope, British Poststructuralism Since 1968
(London: Routledge, 1991) 70.

³³See Stephen Heath, Questions of Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981) 19-75.

³⁴Colin MacCabe, "Realism and Cinema: Notes on Brechtian Theses," Popular Television and Film, ed. T. Bennett, S. Boyd-Bowman, C. Mercer, and J. Woollacott (London: British Film Institute/Open University, 1981) 216-35.

³⁵Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16.3 (1975) 6-18.

³⁶Easthope 60.

³⁷Easthope 16-20.

³⁸This is Easthope's idea (70).

³⁹In "The Tenses of the Imagination" he writes "Imagination has a history" (Writing in Society [London: Verso, n.d., 259]).

⁴⁰Williams, Writing in Society 261.

⁴¹Raymond Williams, "From Reflection to Mediation," Marxism and Literature (New York: Oxford, 1977) 95-100.

⁴²Terry Eagleton, The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism (London: Verso, 1984) 109, qtd. in Brantlinger, Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America (New York: Routledge, 1990) 55.

⁴³Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Centre: Some Problematics and Problems," Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79, ed. Steve Baron, Michael Denning, Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andy Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1980) 15.

⁴⁴Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Centre" 16-17.

⁴⁵Roger Grimshaw, Dorothy Hobson, and Paul Willis thus state the intersection between ethnography and the more general aims of the Centre in "Introduction to Ethnography at the Centre," Culture, Media, Language 74.

[46]Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett (1957; New York: Hill & Wang; London: Methuen, 1964) 107-115.

[47]Colin MacCabe, "Broken English," Futures for English (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 3, qtd. in Brantlinger, Crusoe 36.

[48]Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 1980) 43.

[49]William Boddy, "Alternative Television in the United States," Screen 31.1 (1990) 92.

[50]Boddy 93.

[51]John Fiske and John Hartley introduced a cultural studies perspective to television analysis in the United States by providing a broad view of the relationship of television to orality and to literacy. Though the authors no longer endorse that early work, its translation of the rudiments of British cultural studies into American television studies is noticeable for its revaluation of television culture, and its renunciation of the need for radical intervention in the media (Reading Television [London: Methuen, 1978]).

[52]John Fiske, Television Culture London: Methuen, 1987) 39.

[53]Fiske, "Understanding Popular Culture," ms., presented at Mass Culture Theory Workshop, Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts, Evanston, 14 May 1989, 247.

[54]Fiske, Television Culture 47.

[55]Fiske, "Understanding Popular Culture" 249.

[56]John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," Channels of Discourse, Reassembled, ed. Robert C. Allen, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1992) 284.

[57]From LaClau's three main forms of populism, he chooses the moderate "popular" option, rather than the "democratic," in which antagonism is absorbed, or the "populist," which is radical and surfaces only in a crisis ("Understanding Popular Culture").

[58]Fiske, "Understanding Popular Culture" 222.

[59]Fiske, <u>Television Culture</u> 228.

[60]Fiske, <u>Television Culture</u> 227-28.

[61]Fiske, <u>Television Culture</u> 228.

[62]Fiske, <u>Television Culture</u> 229.

[63]Fiske, <u>Television Culture</u> 219.

[64]Barry King, "Semiotic Determinism and the Photographic Sign: Towards a Theory of Textual Determinism After Post-structuralism," Div. on Semiotics, SCA Convention, Chicago, Oct. 1992.

[65]See passage King discusses in Fiske, <u>Television Culture</u> 116-117.

[66]Fredric Jameson, <u>Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism</u> (Durham, Duke UP, 1991) 69.

[67]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 6.

[68]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 70.

[69]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 48.

[70]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 4-5.

[71]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 44.

[72]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 7.

[73]Maureen Turim, "The Cultural Logic of Video," <u>Illuminating Video</u> 331-342.

[74]Hal Foster, "Postmodernism" 3-20.

[75]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 50.

[76]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 46.

[77]See, for example, Rose Lee Goldberg, <u>Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present</u>, 1979, rev. and rpt. as <u>Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present</u> (New York: Abrams, 1988); Henry Sayre, <u>The Object of Performance</u>; and Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, eds. <u>Performance in</u>

<u>Postmodern Culture</u> (Milwaukee: Center for Twentieth Century
Studies; Madison: Coda Press, 1977).

[78]In a discussion of his 1967 essay "Art and
Objecthoood," Fried said in 1982 that "... much seemingly
advanced recent work is essentially theatrical, depending
for its effects of 'presence' on the staging, the
conspicuous manipulation, of its relation to an audience.
(In the years since 'Art and Objecthood' was written, the
theatrical has assumed a host of new guises and has acquired
a new name: postmodernism)" ("How Modernism Works: A
Response to T.J. Clark," <u>Critical Inquiry</u> 9 [1982] 229n).

[79]Henry Sayre xii. See also Michael Benamou, "Presence
and Play," <u>Performance in Postmodern Culture</u> 3-7.

[80]Marjorie Perloff, address, City University of New
York Graduate Center, 13 Nov. 1992.

[81]See Rosalind Krauss, <u>The Optical Unconscious</u>
(Cambridge: MIT-October, 1993) 6-7.

[82]Fried, "Theories of Art" 57.

[83]Nancy Schorr, <u>Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the
Feminine</u> (New York: Methuen, 1987).

[84]W.J.T. Mitchell, <u>Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology</u>
(Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 31.

[85]Mitchell 27.

[86]Christian Metz, <u>Film Language: A Semiotics of the
Cinema</u>, trans. Michael Taylor (Chicago: U Chicago P with
Oxford, 1974) 65.

[87]Raymond Williams, <u>Raymond Williams on Television</u>, ed.
Alan O'Connor (London: Routledge, 1989) 5.

[88]Perloff, <u>Radical Artifice</u>.

[89]Geoffrey Hartman, "Representation Now," <u>Easy Pieces</u>
(New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 124.

[90]Geoffrey Hartman, "Representation Now" 125.

[91]Barthes, <u>Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography</u>,
trans. Richard Howard (1980; New York: Farrar-Noonday, 1981)
4.

[92]Barthes, _Camera Lucida_ 6.

[93]Barthes, _Camera Lucida_ 7.

[94]Barthes, _Camera Lucida_ 20.

[95]Barthes, _Camera Lucida_ 12.

[96]Fredric Jameson, _Signatures of the Visible_ (New York: Routledge, 1992) 1.

[97]Barthes, _Camera Lucida_ 26.

[98]Jameson, _Postmodernism_ 67.

[99]Jameson, _Postmodernism_ 7.

[100]Perloff, address, CUNY.

[101]See Martin Heidegger, _Poetry, Language, Thought_, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial-Harper & Row, 1971) 33-38.

[102]Jameson, _Postmodernism_ 7.

[103]Jameson, _Postmodernism_ 8.

[104]Jameson, _Postmodernism_ 7.

[105]Jameson, _Postmodernism_ 8.

[106]Jameson, _Postmodernism_ 8.

[107]Jameson, _Postmodernism_ 8-9.

[108]Jameson, _Postmodernism_, p. 9

[109]Susan Buck-Morss, _The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project_. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) 34 and 3-4, respectively.

[110]Buck-Morss 3-4.

[111]Susan Buck-Morss defines this notion of Benjamin's which is discussed further in chapter three, as "a way of seeing that crystallizes antithetical elements by providing the axes for their alignment" (210).

[112]Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry Reconsidered," New German Critique, 6 (Fall 1975), p. 6, rpt. in Patrick Brantlinger, Bread and Circuses, 227.

[113]Jameson, Postmodernism 71.

[114]Jameson, Postmodernism 71.

[115]Jameson says video is unique "...because it is the only art or medium in which this ultimate seam between space and time is the very locus of the form..." (Postmodernism 76).

[116]Jameson, Postmodernism 75

[117]Jameson, Postmodernism 77.

[118]Jameson, Postmodernism 77.

[119]Jameson, Postmodernism 75.

[120]Jameson, Postmodernism 78.

[121]Jameson, Postmodernism 91.

[122]See Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988) 348.

[123]Sayre 210.

[124]Jameson, Postmodernism 91.

Chapter III. Indeterminacy and Materiality of the Image

[1]Marjorie Perloff, Poetics 33.

[2]Perloff, Poetics 45.

[3]Perloff, Poetics 18.

[4]Perloff, Poetics 55.

[5]Perloff, Poetics 57.

[6]E.H. Gombrich, <u>Art and Illusion: A Study in the</u> <u>Psychology of Perception</u>, The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, Bollingen Ser. 5 (1960; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 281.

[7]Perloff, <u>Poetics</u> 72n.

[8]Perloff, <u>Poetics</u> 76.

[9]Perloff, <u>Poetics</u> 76.

[10]Here is the poem, as cited by Perloff (<u>Poetics</u> 70).
>   Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
>   Susie Asado.
>   Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
>   Susie Asado.
>   Susie Asado which is a told tray sure.
>   A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers.
>   When the ancient light grey is clean it is yellow,
>   it is a silver seller.
>   This is a please this is a please there are the
>   saids of jelly.
>   These are the wets these say the sets to leave
>   a crown to Incy.
>   Incy is short for incubus.
>   A pot.   A pot is a beginning of a rare bit of

trees.   Trees tremble, the old vats are in bobbles,
>   bobbles which shade and shove and render

clean,   render clean must.
>   Drink pups.
>   Drink pups drink pups lease a sash hold, see
>   it shine and a bobolink has pins.   It shows a

nail.

>   What is a nail.   A nail is a unison.
>   Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.

This poem seems to evoke, through a montage of aural and visual images, a miniature but specifically vague portrait, almost cinematic, of a woman who serves tea. Going with this "code," as Perloff puts it, the various images and syntactical reversals begin to resonate with the implications of her position -- Susie Asado is not a "who" but a "which," and thus the phrase a "told tray sure," becomes more possible. The lines "sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea" do not, to me, "dance," but move steadily, as if to evoke a private hum, or chant, or working song. The syntactic shifts, in which adjectives and verbs become nouns, do not seem to be arbitrary but evoke the image of routine, of house

rules. This is not the place to analyze the poem; I only mean to register frustration at Perloff's focus on what the poem fails to do rather than on what it does.

[11]Perloff, _Radical Artifice_ 36.

[12]Perloff, _Radical_ 78.

[13]Sayre xiii.

[14]Sayre xiv.

[15]"Fischl," an interview with Eric Fischl by Donald Kuspit (New York: Elizabeth Avedon Editions, Vintage Contemporary Artists, 1987) 6-9, qtd. in Sayre 26-27.

[16]Sayre 26.

[17]Gregory Ulmer equates collage and dissemination by way of Derrida, in his essay "The Object of Post-Criticism" (_The Anti-Aesthetic_ 88-90).

[18]Sayre 20.

[19]Sayre 200.

[20]Sayre 147.

[21]Sayre 148.

[22]Deleuze, "Nomad Thought," in _The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation_, ed. David B. Allison (New York: Delta, 1977) 142.

[23]Deleuze says of Kafka: "By dint of a certain indeterminacy and sobriety, he expresses something within the codified limits of the German language that had never before been conveyed" ("Nomad Thought" 143).

[24]Deleuze, "Nomad Thought" 144.

[25]Deleuze, "Nomad Thought" 144.

[26]Deleuze, "Nomad Thought" 144.

[27]Deleuze, "Nomad Thought" 146.

[28]Victor Turner. From Ritual to Theatre: The Human
Seriousness of Play (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982) 17-
18.

[29]Marjorie Perloff, introduction, Postmodern Genres ed.
Marjorie Perloff, a special edition of Genre XX.3-4 (1987)
233-39.

[30]Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," Image-Music-
Text (New York: Farrar-Noonday, 1977) 17.

[31]Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," French Literary
Theory Today: A Reader, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R.
Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 11-17, qtd. in Schorr
14.

[32]Baudrillard writes:
This would be the successive phases of the image:
- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the absence of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is
its own pure simulacrum (Simulations, trans. Paul Foss,
Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman [New York:
Semiotext(e), 1983] 11).

[33]Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-
Garde," trans. Lisa Liebmann, Artforum, 22, part 8 (April
1984) 36-43, rpt. in The Lyotard Reader, ed. Andrew Benjamin
(Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 196-211.

[34]Lyotard, "Sublime" 199.

[35]Lyotard, "Sublime" 201.

[36]Schorr 19.

[37]Bruce Nauman from "Pictures of Sculpture in a Room"
(Los Angeles, winter, 1965-66) qtd. in Lippard, Six Years
11.

[38]Joel Snyder, "Benjamin on Reproducibility and Aura: A
Reading of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical
Reproducibility,'" Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics,
History, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983,
1989) 158.

[39]Maureen Turim, "The Cultural Logic of Video,"
Illuminating Video.

[40]Joel Snyder has notes the frustrating and fragile
nature of this article, which is he calls "a linked series
of theses concerning the definition of art in a pre-
revolutionary period.... [theses which are] dialectical and
their terms in dynamic opposition." What grounds these
theses, he argues, is Benjamin's conviction that perception
is historically and socially conditioned, and that it
changes over time (158-174).

[41]Benjamin, "The Work of Art," Illuminations 220.

[42]Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 220.

[43]Brecht writes "What [the film] provides is applicable
conclusions about human actions in detail." See "The Film,
the Novel, and the Theatre," Brecht on Theatre 48.

[44]Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 233.

[45]Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 233.

[46]Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 234.

[47]Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 234.

[48]Snyder would argue that the real issue here is that
of "natural" and "technically informed" vision. If we can
now see things we couldn't see before, with the aid of stop-
motion stills and slow motion, then film and photography
have the potential to make available a "negatively critical
stance towards the world as 'given'" (167).

[49]Susan Buck-Morss argues that Benjamin envisioned the
new techniques of slowing and extending perception as a
compensation for, or healing of, the ruptures in modern
society caused by the speeding up of time and the
fragmentation of space (Buck-Morss 268).

[50]Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 234.

[51]Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 238.

[52]Douglas Davis, Filmgoing/Videogoing: Making Distinctions, Artculture: Essays on the Postmodern (New York: Harper, 1977) 82.

[53]Jean Baudrillard argues precisely the opposite. His arguments about the simulacrum and the "hyperreal" extend Benjamin's, unequivocally finding that the image or convention of the "event" is no longer separable from the event itself. Baudrillard argues that the "image bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Simulations 11).

[54]Tony Wilson, "Reading The Postmodernist Image: A 'Cognitive Mapping," Screen 31.4 (1990) 392.

[55]Buck-Morss x.

[56]Walter Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth, Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: U of Chicago P and the Philosophical Forum, Inc., 1983) 47.

[57]Buck-Morss argues that Benjamin's interest in images of mass culture, of the "fossilized commodity," was connected to his idea that they were historical clues, "with an objective meaning that separates Benjamin's 'idea' of natural history from the simpler, more polemical form of Heartfield's montage" (66).

[58]Buck-Morss 66.

[59]Buck-Morss 68.

[60]Buck-Morss 73.

[61]Buck-Morss 33.

[62]Buck-Morss 118.

[63]Buck-Morss 121.

[64]Buck-Morss 210.

[65]Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," trans. Lloyd Spencer New German Critique 34 (1985) 49.

[66]Buck-Morss 146.

[67]Walter Benjamin <u>The Origin of German Tragic Drama</u>, trans. John Osborne (1963; London: Verso, 1977) 31.

[68]See Buck-Morss 219.

[69]Qtd. in Buck-Morss 219.

[70]Richard Wolin, "Benjamin's Passagenwerk," <u>Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History</u> 213.

[71]Buck-Morss 241.

[72]Buck-Morss 33.

[73]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 81-82.

[74]Jameson, <u>Postmodernism</u> 81-82.

[75]Buck Morss 33.

[76]Buck-Morss 245.

[77]Buck-Morss 245.

[78]John Fiske, <u>Television Culture</u> 240-264.

[79]Recently, John Caughie, "Adorno's Reproach: Repetition, Difference, and Television Genre," <u>Screen</u> 32.2 (1991) 138-141.

[80]Robert Stam, <u>Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film</u> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 220-221.

[81]Stam 221.

[82]Stam 221.

[83]Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," <u>The Dialogic Imagination</u>, ed. and trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: U of Texas P) 262.

[84]Bakhtin, <u>Dialogic</u> 279.

[85]Bakhtin, <u>Dialogic</u> 273.

[86]Bakhtin, <u>Dialogic</u> 272.

[87]Horace Newcomb, "On the Dialogic Aspects of Mass Communication," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 1 (1984) 34-50.

[88]Newcomb 44.

[89]"The speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another, an ideologue, and his words are always ideologemes. A particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance. It is precisely as ideologemes that discourse becomes the object of representation in the novel, and it is for the same reason novels are never in danger of becoming a mere aimless verbal play" (Dialogic 333).

[90]Bakhtin, Dialogic 279.

[91]Bakhtin, Dialogic 281-282.

[92]Bakhtin, Dialogic 282.

[93]Bakhtin, Dialogic 283.

[94]Bakhtin, Dialogic 284.

[95]Bakhtin, Dialogic 277.

[96]Bakhtin, Dialogic 328.

[97]Bakhtin, Dialogic 330-31.

[98]Bakhtin, Dialogic 329.

[99]Bakhtin, Dialogic 333.

[100]See Barthes, Mythologies, sel. and trans. Annette Lavers (1957; New York: Farrar-Noonday, 1972).

[101]Barthes, Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar-Noonday, 1977) 18.

[102]Though Sayre mistakenly argues that he collapses this distinction -- Sayre quotes what Barthes says about the connotative level of drawings, paintings, cinema, and theatre, that it is "is very likely constituted either by a universal symbolic order or by a period rhetoric, in short by a stock of stereotypes...." (Barthes, Image-Music-Text 18) as if Barthes meant it for photography's connotative level too (See Sayre 254-55), but Sayre gets it wrong:

immediately before and after this quote Barthes expressly says that photography cannot access the symbolic order.

[103]A concept borrowed from Edgar Morin's _Le Cinéma ou L'homme Imaginaire_ which Barthes summarizes as a kind of informational structure. "In photogenia the connoted message is the image itself, 'embellished' (which is to say in general sublimated) by techniques of lighting, exposure and printing" (Barthes _Image-Music-Text_ 23).

[104]Barthes _Image-Music-Text_ 22.

[105]Barthes, _Image-Music-Text_ 23.

[106]Barthes _Image-Music-Text_ 30.

[107]Barthes, _Image-Music-Text_ 42.

[108]Barthes, _Image-Music-Text_ 42.

[109]Barthes, _Image-Music-Text_ 44.

[110]Barthes, _Empire of Signs_, trans. Richard Howard (1979; New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 78.

[111]Barthes, _Camera Lucida_ 21.

[112]Barthes, _Camera Lucida_ 60.

[113]Roland Barthes, _The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1968-1980_, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 106-107, qtd. in Sayre 259.

[114]"Then I decided that this disorder and this dilemma, revealed by my desire to write on Photography, corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two language, one expressive, the other critical; and at the heart of this critical language, between several discourses, those of sociology, semiology, and of psychoanalysis -- but that, by ultimate dissatisfaction with all of them, I was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me (however naïve it might be): a desperate resistance to any reductive system" (Barthes, _Camera Lucida_ 8).

[115]Barthes, _Camera Lucida_ 71.

[116]See Turner, <u>From Ritual to Theatre</u> 65.

Chapter IV. Readings in Experimental Video

[1]As Dara Birnbaum wrote, "...the form and materiality of this medium intrinsically binds it to mass media and as such, it must reach the masses ("Up Against the Wall!" <u>Art Com</u> 20 [1983] 25).

[2]John Hanhardt, "Dé-Collage/Collage," <u>Illuminating Video</u> 75.

[3]Nam June Paik with Charlotte Moorman, "Videa, Vidiot, Videology," in <u>New Artists Video</u> 132.

[4]Paik and Moorman, "Videa" 133.

[5]Paik and Moorman, "Videa" 123.

[6]Paik and Moorman, "Videa" 129.

[7]Paik and Moorman, "Videa" 132.

[8]Paik's distributor, Electronic Arts Intermix, hereafter EAI, use the boilerplate phrase "mass media appropriation, deconstruction and manipulation as cultural and political critique," a phrase which locates the tape and its makers in a political and academic discourse which helps to frame, or ground, the experience of the tape (<u>Electronic Arts Intermix: Video</u>, catalogue, ed. Lori Zippay [New York: Electronic Arts Intermix, 1991] 37).

[9]Norman M. Klein, "Audience Culture and the Video Screen, <u>Illuminating Video</u> 390.

[10]Klein, "Audience Culture" 390.

[11]Benjamin Buchloch, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art, <u>Artforum</u> XXI.1 (1982) 45, qtd. in Craig Owens 72.

[12]Owens 72. See also Craig Owens "Phantasmagoria of the Media," <u>Art in America</u> 70.5 (1982) 98-100.

[13]Klein, "Audience Culture" 391.

[14]Sayre 80.

[15]Sayre 80.

[16]Qtd. in "Dara Birnbaum," Electronic Arts Intermix 37.

[17]Rosalind Krauss, "Video, The Aesthetics of Narcissism," October 1.1 (1976), rpt. in New Artists Video 121-38.

[18]Krauss, "Video" 45.

[19]Krauss, "Video" 45.

[20]Krauss, "Video" 48.

[21]Krauss, "Video" 53.

[22]Krauss, "Video" 53.

[23]Krauss, "Video" 49.

[24]Jameson, Postmodernism 72.

[25]Ingrid Wiegand, "Videospace: Varieties of the Video Installation," New Artists' Video 181-91.

[26]Qtd. in "Peter Campus," Electronic Arts Intermix: Video 59.

[27]Krauss, "Video" 53.

[28]Jonas equates the mirror, deep landscape, and the "dislocating" medium of video in "Seven Years," by Joan Jonas (with Rosalind Krauss). In The Drama Review 19.1 (1975) 13-17.

[29]Joan Jonas, qtd. in Howard Junker, "The Mirror Staged," Art in America Feb. 1981: 87-95.

[30]Junker, "The Mirror Staged" 87.

[31]Junker 88.

[32]Constance de Jong, "Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy," The Drama Review 16.2 (1972) 63-65.

[33]Joan Jonas, statement, <u>Video Art: An Anthology</u> 73.

[34]Krauss, "Video."

[35]Sayre 83.

[36] Kathy O'Dell, "Performance, Video, and Trouble in the Home," <u>Illuminating Video</u> 146.

[37]O'Dell 147.

[38]Martha Rosler, "Ideology and the Politics of Everyday Life," Video Viewpoints Lecture, Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 18, 1983.

[39]Sayre 81.

[40]Bill Viola, "History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime" 18.

[41]William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," <u>Blake's Poetry and Designs</u>, sel and ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York: Norton, 1979) 93.

[42]Bill Viola, "General Statement," from project proposal submitted to WXXI TV Rochester, NY, February 1980.

[43]Here is his description of Viola's work:
... a kind of metaphysical structuralism in which nonverbal streams of image and sound -- impeccably crafted, magisterially orchestrated -- explore the nature of the photographic medium, the splendors of the phenomenal world, the categories of perception, the cognitive and spiritual inner life of the witness. Compounded of many resonances, each level of meaning interwoven with myriad others, these exquisite 'visual songs' give us the elegant music of the poet's voice (Gene Youngblood, <u>Metaphysical Structuralism: The Videotapes of Bill Viola</u>, notes for videodisc edition of Bill Viola: Selected Works [Los Angeles: Voyager, 1987] 2).

[44]The <u>Boston Globe</u> describes "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like" as "an odyssey into animal consciousness," a "highly symbolic visual poem on the place of the individual in the universe."Shawn M. McGivern, "Viola Looks to Animals for Visions of Humanity," <u>The Boston Globe</u> 26 September 1986: 37-45. The <u>San Francisco Chronicle</u> writes:
Unlike so many artists who work with video, Viola does

not presume that what we see onscreen will appear self-explanatory just because we have all watched so much TV. On the contrary, he weighs every creative decision in terms of the questions it may raise. His premise is that even the most straightforward, matter-of-fact image turns into a mysterious fiction once we cease to accept it passively (Kenneth Baker, "Viola's Video Quest for His Animal Self," San Francisco Chronicle 26 Sept. 1986, 81).

[45]Amy Taubin, "The Electronic Spike," The Village Voice 10 Nov. 1987: 53.

[46]Viola, "History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime" 22.

[47]John Minkowsky, Video Art Review, an unpublished information sheet about Bill Viola's work, written to accompany a series of 18 programs presented by Anthology film Archives in collaboration with EAI, May 1981.

[48]Qtd. in Marita Sturken, "Temporal Interventions: The Videotapes of Bill Viola" Afterimage Summer 1982: 30.

[49]Qtd. in Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, "Reality as Mirage," Artweek 3 May 1980.

[50]Gene Youngblood describes Viola's strategies of "temporal ambiguity" in his work: Viola deliberately confuses real time, in order to liberate it from the technology which defined it. So Viola uses a strategy known in music as "metric modulation," when tempo changes without a perceptible interval (Metaphysical Structuralism 12).

[51]J. Hoberman, "Vidiot's Delight," The Village Voice 4 Feb. 1981: 50.

[52]Bill Viola, "General Statement."

[53]Bill Viola, "General Statement."

[54]Michael Nash, "Bill Viola's Re-Visions of Mortality," High Performance 37 (1987) 60-65.

[55]Nash 62.

[56]Bill Viola, "General Statement."

[57]Qtd. in Marita Sturken, "Temporal Interventions" 30.

[58]Nash 62.

[59]Kenneth Baker, "Viola's Video Quest for His Animal Self," San Francisco Chronicle 26 Sept. 1986, 81.

[60]Shuntaro Tanikawa, introduction to the screening of his "Video Letter," Video Viewpoints series, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 16 Apr. 1993.

[61]Nash 62.

[62]Nash 62.

[63]Nash 63.

[64]Bill Viola, "Sight Unseen: Enlightened Squirrels and Fatal Experiments, Video 80 Spring 1982: 31.

[65]J. Hoberman, "This Island Earth," The Village Voice 30 Sept. 1988: 61.

[66]Nash 62.

[67]Nash (62) finds this association in J. E. Cirlot, The Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962) 102.

IV. Conclusion

[1]Williams, Raymond Williams on Television 9.

[2]Raymond Williams, "Drama in a Dramatised Society" Raymond Williams on Television 4.

[3]Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 219.

[4]Jameson wrote:
> Barthes thought certain kinds of writing --
> perhaps we should say, certain kinds of sentences
> -- to be scriptable, because they made you wish to
> write further yourself; they stimulated imitation,
> and promised a pleasure in combining language that
> had little enough to do with the notation of new
> ideas. But I think that he thought this because
> he took an attitude towards those sentences which

was not essentially linguistic, and had little to
do with reading: what is scriptible indeed is the
visual or the musical, what corresponds to the two
outside senses that tug at language between
themselves and dispute its peculiarly unphysical
attention, its short circuit of the sentences for
the mind itself that makes of the mysterious thing
reading some superstitious and adult power, which
the lowlier arts imagine uncomprehendingly, as
animals might dream of the strangeness of human
thinking (<u>Signatures of the Visible</u> 2).

[5]Gilles Deleuze, <u>Cinema 1: The Movement-Image</u>, trans.
Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone,
1986); and <u>Cinema 2: The Time-Image</u> (London: Athlone, 1989).

[6]Vivian Sobchack, <u>The Address of the Eye: A
Phenomenology of Film Experience</u> (Princeton: Princeton UP,
1992).

[7]Foster, "Postmodernism."

[8]Williams, "Drama" 7.

[9]Joseph Roach, introduction, <u>Critical Theory and
Performance</u>, ed. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann
Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992) 12.

[10] Richard Shechner, "Invasions Friendly and
Unfriendly: The Dramaturgy of Direct Theater," <u>Critical
Theory and Performance</u>, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R.
Roach (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992) 105.

[11]Johannes Birringer, <u>Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism</u>
(Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) xii.

[12]Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living,"
<u>Critical Theory Since Plato</u>, ed. Hazard Adams (San Diego:
Harcourt, 1971) 942-47.

[13]Richard Schechner, "Six Axioms for Environmental
Theatre," <u>Public Domain: Essays on the Theatre</u> (New York:
Discus Books, 1970) 159.

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_____. "Pop Pop Video: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating." Vocals: Dori Levine, Sally Swisher. Instrumentation: Robert Raposo. Disco: Donna Summer. 1980. 6 min., color, stereo sound.

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17:24 min, b&w, sound.

_____. "Vertical Roll." 1972. 19:38 min., b&w, sound.

_____. "Brooklyn Bridge." ed. Jill Kroesen, Peter Eggers.
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Rennes, 1988. 6:12 min, color, stereo sound.

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b&w, sound.

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_____. "Bouncing in the Corner #2." 1969.

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min., b&w, sound.

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Video: Brian Connell, post-prod. John Baker, with Phil
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Dana White, Martha Rosler. 1977. 39:20 min., color,
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     Williams), 1972. 61:28 min., b&w, sound.
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     Kenneth Werner. 1967-69. 4:00 min., b&w.