DISSERTATION IN WHICH THERE APPEAR
LOST PUNCHLINES, DREADFUL PUNS, LOW RESOLUTION, ETC.:
ON THE FAILURE OF HUMOUR IN AVANT-GARDE FILM AND VIDEO

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the overlooked functions that humour has served in American avant-garde film and video, arguing that humour is involved consistently in many of the key operations and philosophies that have energized these moving image practices. Taking humour as an alternative historical and interpretive lens, this dissertation conducts new readings of three major formations or "moments in the discourse" of the American avant-gardes. These are: *underground film*, *structural film*, and *early feminist video art*.

A branching theme of these readings is failure, seen to carry complex meanings and humorous pleasures in various cases of avant-garde activity. The introductory chapter details the propagandization of failure in the 1960s underground cinema, and argues that a divisive brand of humour highlights the sense of the "avant-garde" in this cinema. Chapter 1 re-conceptualizes the "humourless" structural film movement of the 60s and 70s, arguing that, for filmmakers like Michael Snow, the idea of structure is not a dogmatic working principle but something of a ruse, one whose limits are meant to be teased, pushed, and exceeded. Moving to early feminist video art, Chapter 2 emphasizes the importance of humour in the project of articulating feminist political horizons. In videotapes by Susan Mogul and Martha Rosler, performative nonchalance and lack of preciousness about low-grade equipment can be seen as forms of humorous "delivery," which stay utopically open to future re-articulations. Circling back to underground film, Chapter 3 locates humour in the failure to distinguish sharply between the avant-garde and popular culture. Through readings of humour in queer underground film, and then in more recent pop appropriation videos, this chapter illustrates the hilarity, critique, and utopian feeling that can result when the "effects" of pop and of the avant-garde are brought excessively close.

This dissertation assembles conceptual scaffolding for understanding humorous failure as a variable avant-garde theme, drawing upon such scholars as Matei Călinescu, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz. With failure in mind, this dissertation further reflects on the instability of humour itself as an object of study, and as a device, attitude, or value that might be put to work for us.

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INTRODUCTION

TO THE FAILURE OF AVANT-GARDE HUMOUR

God forbid art be funny.
                    - Ilene Segalove[1]

This is a study of humour in avant-garde film and video. I must confess I have had my

occasional doubts about this project. How can I forget the many laughless nights spent in the

hushed, reverent atmosphere of screening spaces for avant-garde cinema, where amidst long

stretches of pin-drop silence one is more likely to hear the sound of a neighbour's belly gurgling

from hunger than quaking with laughter? Attend a major festival showcase for experimental

work, and humour is bound to surface so rarely that when it does the audience can be felt to

heave with a collective overcompensation of guffaws. (In my experience, the prospects for

laughter seem brighter depending on how many young artists are represented in a program, for

reasons that might become clearer as my argument unfolds.) It is understandable, then, if humour

in avant-garde cinema often comes advertised as oxymoron or *exception*, a break from the

challenging and serious work that forms the major, dare I say popular, conception of this field of

art practice.[2]

As with all matters humorous, there is a lesson about context to be learned here.

Historically avant-garde film has travelled through many spaces, some more inhibited than

others. A convenient archetype of the "serious" avant-garde viewing situation is the Invisible

Cinema (1970-74), the infamously authoritarian experimental theatre designed by filmmaker

Peter Kubelka, housed in the first "museum" of avant-garde film, Anthology Film Archives in

New York City. Kubelka's design for the theatre – "shell-like" seats individually partitioned and

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[1] Quoted in Carole Ann Klonarides, "ILENE SEGALOVE [Interview]," in *California Video: Artists and Histories*, ed. Glenn Phillips (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 204.
[2] For an example of the oxymoronic approach, see Blake Williams, "Punch Lines," *Little White Lies* 68 (February 2017): 23–25.

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hooded, as well as severely raked to reduce sightline obstruction; an all-encompassing blackness

in the architecture, which would utterly vanish before the light of the movie screen – was meant

to construct, in Kubelka's words, "a community that is not disturbing to others."[3] As a strict

policy, no latecomers were allowed into the theatre, and spectators were encouraged to keep

noise to a minimum during the films. Unsurprisingly, it has been said that comedy did not play

well within the confines of the Invisible Cinema, given that "there was so little sense of shared

laughter."[4] To contrast this situation with some reports of the rambunctious environments at

experimental film showcases during the heyday of the 1960s underground cinema, one begins to

understand why the arrival of Anthology Film Archives has often been scapegoated as the final

nail in the coffin of the wild and woolly underground, erecting in its place the image of avant-

garde film as a stiflingly self-serious activity. It is worth noting that many humorous works of

the underground would have also played at the Invisible Cinema, these works now positioned as

"essential" masterpieces of the avant-garde. One can't help speculating – was the humour of

these films muted by their elevated status and situation, or perhaps did it slip undetected into the

void-like darkness of the theatre space?

Today, we should be ever mindful of contexts for evaluating avant-garde humour. The

decisions that avant-garde curators make to "lighten up" their programs with the occasional

humorous work should not be mistaken for a sign that such work is scarce in the field of avant-

garde practice. As for our own ability to appreciate the humour of avant-garde work, we can be

forgiven if we find ourselves more or less uptight depending on whether we view a program in

[3] Peter Kubelka, "The Invisible Cinema," *Design Quarterly* 93 (1974): 34.

[4] Calvin Tomkins, *The Scene: Reports on Post-Modern Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 190. Kubelka doesn't agree: "You can hear [the other people in the auditorium] laugh, but it's subdued. It's as if we were all brothers and sisters in our mother's womb." Quoted in footnote 39 of Julian Hanich, "The Invisible Cinema," in *Exposing the Film Apparatus: The Film Archive as a Research Laboratory*, ed. Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 347–53.

an art gallery setting or in a back-alley microcinema. Receptiveness to the comic pleasures of a work, including our ability to appreciate these pleasures as more or less exceptional, may be affected as much by the discursive space in which we encounter the work as by the quality of the chairs we sit in (will we be asked to fold and stack them at the end of the night?) and the close availability of recreational substances.

For reasons such as these I remain skeptical of the idea that humour necessarily makes avant-garde work more *accessible* (as filmmaker George Landow once quipped, "Like a life preserver?"), since the ability to access humour in the avant-garde context is not itself uncomplicated, in a number of senses. What precisely is the nature of access afforded by avant-garde humour, if it is to be treated as a *relief* from the avant-garde's main projects, a sideline attraction or, worse, a dereliction of duty? Another complication more directly concerns audience reception. We should not take for granted that avant-garde humour will instantly translate to just any audience member, providing them the universal laugh as mollifier of avant-garde intractability. As Michele Pierson reminds us, to speak about the accessibility of avant-garde cinema is not only a way of evaluating its so-called immediate pleasures, but also of learning how these pleasures are ineluctably framed for specialized audiences by situations such as programming, supported as they are by curatorial writing, artist talks, and other discourses.[5] At the risk of stating the obvious, the humour of avant-garde cinema comes into relief the more closely acquainted we are with this still very marginal cinema, which includes knowledge of its historical frameworks. If this sounds like I'm saying that humour in the avant-garde work needs to be explained – and therefore, can't be very funny at all – let me try again. Our openness to the humour of the avant-garde, our sense of this humour's richness and pertinence, will be affected

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[5] Michele Pierson, "The Accessibility of the Avant-Garde: Talk about American Experimental Cinema," *Discourse* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 3–29.

by our understanding of such factors as artists' dispositions; contexts of exhibition; grounds for critique and resistance; histories of technique, and so forth. I don't think this is all that different from stating a commonplace: that humour always works to construct a community, with shared knowledge and sympathies.

My focus here is on American film and video avant-gardes (at times North American, as a few Canadians enter the picture), and then mostly in the major centres of California and New York. This dissertation does not intend to plea for humour's exceptional status within this avant-garde field. That is to say, I am not primarily concerned with humour as a form of relief *from*, and thus exception to, the avant-garde, which temporarily spells artist and audience alike from the demanding side – some would say the boredom – of radical art practice (though this may sometimes be the case). The preponderance of evidence shows that humour does not hold this digressive or negative function in the historical avant-gardes that form a partial backdrop to the work I discuss here; for example, it makes little sense to speak of moments of "comic relief" or "levity" in Dada and Surrealism, if by that we mean a break with some form of sober business as usual *within* these avant-gardes – as opposed to in society, or within art institutions. Likewise, the formations of avant-garde film and video I explore in this dissertation, while perhaps less generally celebrated for their humour, offer enough evidence of it to encourage conceiving their humour as more than a momentary retreat from some internally enforced mode of conduct. Throughout this dissertation, I instead argue for the recognition of humour as connected to core operations and philosophies – represented in films but also in the discourses and rhetorics surrounding film work – of the avant-garde formations in question. These formations are, roughly stated: *underground film*, *structural film*, and *feminist video art*.[6]

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[6] Perhaps I should explain why I choose to describe these formations as "avant-garde." While I often use the term "experimental" interchangeably with "avant-garde," conceding the slippage between these terms that is fairly

The outline of this introductory chapter is as follows. First, I will sketch a (not

necessarily *the*) background for thinking about humour historically as an avant-garde device,

attitude, or value. This will entail stops in theories and histories of the European avant-gardes,

most notably Dada and Surrealism; a detour into these avant-gardes' relationship with slapstick

comedy; and finally a landing place in the American underground cinema,, where a preliminary

case study of humour's functions in this cinema will be elaborated. An emergent theme of this

humour is failure, on technical and performative levels; I use this failure as an opportunity to

once more address the difficulties avant-garde humour sometimes has in reaching an audience.

From the case study of underground film, I briefly expand into the spaces of structural film and

feminist video, to situate failure as a broader theme in what we can call art humour of the 1960s

and 70s.[7] Finally, I will comment on my methodology, providing much-belated details on how I

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common in the literature on avant-garde film, the latter term largely takes precedence in my study because of what it affords not just in terms of aesthetic but also social and institutional discussion. Obviously I do not have in mind here Peter Bürger's restricted sense of the avant-garde, as an historically confined movement (or set of movements) against the institution of art, with the goal of sublating art in a new praxis of life. Rather, I'm more concerned with the features of what David Cottington calls the "alternative professionalism" of historical avant-garde formations, viz., their drive for autonomous or oppositional aesthetics; their independent technical and craft means (including their founding of little magazines and alternative exhibition sites); and their collectivity or *esprit de corps*. I believe that accounting for these features will go some way towards illuminating the humour of the formations I'm exploring. It will become clear, however, that I cannot always sustain the sense of the avant-garde in each of these formations; for example, so-called structural film cannot be comfortably thought as a close-knit movement of artists with its own internally generated propaganda wing, à la the underground, or even feminist art. The idea of (North American) structural film's coherence as an avant-garde formation is mainly an exterior, critical move, with an emphasis on aesthetic matters, and as such controversial. Structural film, then, can be thought as a problematic case within the concept of avant-garde film, which (unintentionally) throws into crisis certain notions of the avant-gardism of the underground cinema from which it issues. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); David Cottington, *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 40.

[7] The literature on humour in twentieth- and twenty-first-century art is substantial, and growing, though perhaps still marginal relative to other topics in art. Some basic, affirmative surveys include: Sheri Klein, *Art & Laughter* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007); and Nicholas Roukes, *Humor in Art: A Celebration of Visual Wit* (Worcester, M.A.: Davis Press, 1997). A valuable anthology of critical and historical essays is John C. Welchman, ed., *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2010). The reader is also referred to any number of catalogues on exhibitions of humorous art; one example is Dominic Molon and Michael Rooks, eds., *Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2005). An attempt at defining an emergent mode of contemporary art humour, one based in the "nonfiction" humour of life processes and objects, is David Robbins, *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy* (Denmark: Pork Salad Press, 2011). For a reflection on methodology in the analysis of art humour, see Annie Gérin, "A Second Look at Laughter: Humor in the Visual Arts," *Humor* 26, no. 1 (January 2013): 155–76.

am conceptualizing and working through "humour" and its various instances in this project. As

my historical sketch and case study will have established, key to my thinking about humour is its

potential for instability, or ability to make unstable, which gives a clue as to its privileged

functions in the avant-garde. Thus, I proceed from Heather Diack's insight that "Humour shares

with art an unpredictable, irrational, and potentially productive uncontainability."[8] This

introduction concludes with a chapter breakdown, and a list of the main questions driving this

inquiry.

AVANT-GARDE HUMOUR: THE 60s, BEFORE & AFTER

> In 50 years or so, which is like 10 centuries from now, people will look at the film of the
> 1960s. . . . And I hope that they would see that the 1960s was not only the age of
> achievements, but of laughter.
>   -Yoko Ono[9]

In the quote above, when Ono refers to the 1960s as an age of laughter, the example she

has in mind is her *Film No. 4* (1966-67), a black and white, 16mm sequence of naked human

asses walking a treadmill, shot in close-up. Two versions of this film were made within a year's

span: one shot in New York City, six minutes and silent, depicting fifteen asses; the other shot in

London, eighty minutes with a soundtrack of mock-intellectual commentary, laid over top of

approximately 100 asses. Many of these asses belong to figures of the art world, who in the

second version can be heard to poke fun at themselves on the soundtrack; hence, why Ono

encourages us to remember that the 1960s were not only an age of great artistic "achievements"

(art that is "worthwhile" as one commenter in the film puts it), but were also full of iconoclastic

laughter. In the same statement about *Film No. 4*, Ono wonders why the men who call the shots

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[8] Heather Diack, "The Gravity of Levity: Humour as Conceptual Critique," *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 37, no. 1 (2012): 75.
[9] Yoko Ono, "Yoko Ono on Yoko Ono," in *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Wheeler W. Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 221.

in the art world take themselves so seriously, why they insist on "making a bore of everything they touch." Self-seriousness particularly infects the film world, writes Ono, because directors tend to be precious about maintaining sole authorship over their mysterious, moody, and above all original works. By contrast, Ono encourages her *Film No. 4* to be copied by anyone who pleases: "I'm hoping by seeing this film people will start to make their own home movies like crazy."[10] This does not mean that Ono lacks for ambition herself. What Ono hopes to achieve with her nude bottoms project is nothing less than world peace.

Ono's words seem to confirm the idea that avant-garde film practice was in dire need of "comic relief" in the 1960s. Whatever perspective may have framed her remarks (one presumes she had filmmakers in mind, and had reason to launch a feminist protest against them), from the vantage point of, yes, fifty years or so, it appears as though humour suffused more of film practice than Ono was here willing to let on. If one looks at the underground film scene of 1960s New York, into the context of which Ono's *Film No. 4* would have entered,[11] there is no shortage of humour of iconoclastic, self-deprecating, and free-spirited varieties, instances of which this dissertation is bound to address. Writing near the beginning of the decade, Jonas Mekas, chief spokesperson for the underground cinema, called attention to a "New Humor" in American art, equal parts Zen and Beat, which flowed perceptibly through contemporary film, literature, and painting. "There is humor everywhere—a Chinese sort of humor, with a touch of wisdom, something like: Who the hell am I, why should I take myself so seriously?"[12] Surely it was something of this infectious spirit that Ono's film joined and contributed to. At the same time, the obsession with "achievement" is unmistakable in art of the 1960s, myths of authorship and

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[10] Ono, 221.
[11] The first version of the film debuted at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque, a nomadic screening series which acted as the official exhibition arm of the underground cinema.
[12] Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, ed. Gregory R. Smulewicz-Zucker, Second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 65.

individual genius surviving, and even being reinforced by, attempts to overturn these same hang-

ups. It is advisable to follow Ono in conceiving of the 60s as *both* an era of achievements and of

humour, but moreover as an intertwined mixture of efforts that saw artists – and what concern us

most, film- and video-makers – both crediting themselves with breaking new ground, and

questioning (one could say teasing) the very ground upon which they stood.

HUMOUR AS AVANT-GARDE "TRADITION"

Given the proper vantage point, it is hard to imagine a concept of the avant-garde that

doesn't make room for humour. The 1960s had a wealth of humorous avant-garde practice from

which to draw inspiration, a veritable "tradition" of art humour established, above others, by

Dada and Surrealism. The place of humour in these avant-gardes is complex and can only be

treated in piecemeal fashion here. We can note Surrealism's implication in "black humour," with

its rootedness in the absurdities of World War, as anthologized by André Breton.[13] The

Surrealists' interest in the operations of the unconscious and the creativity of chance also resulted

in alignments with humour, as in Breton's inclusion of *images that provoke laughter* among the

favoured products of automatic writing[14]; or as captured in Louis Aragon's proclamation: "I

grasp chance within me, I grasp all of a sudden how I surpass myself: I *am* chance, and having

formed this proposition I laugh at the thought of all human activity."[15] The revolt against

rationality had been previously advanced by Dada, which helps to account for humour's pride of

place among Dadaists as well. Hans Richter attributed the "manic, clowning aspect of Dada" to

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[13] André Breton, ed., *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997). See also John D. Erickson, "Surrealist Black Humor as Oppositional Discourse," *Symposium* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 198–215.

[14] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 38.

[15] Louis Aragon, *A Wave of Dreams*, trans. Susan de Muth (London: Thin Man Press, 2011), 13–14.

the joy produced by emancipation from rationality, which freed Dadaists to play with

contradictions, antitheses, and perhaps – joy of all joys – to discover unforeseen unities in

contradiction.[16] From this perspective, irrationality could be viewed as a new way of thinking;

hence, Dadaists frequently linked laughter and thought. Francis Picabia explained the attitude

behind the Dada comedy film *Entr'acte* (1924) in these terms:

> *Entr'acte* does not believe in very much, in the pleasure of life perhaps; it believes in the
> pleasure of inventing, it respects nothing except the desire to burst out laughing, for
> laughing, thinking and working are of equal value and are indispensable to each other.[17]

Marcel Duchamp, the chief emissary of Dada in America, called humour and laughter his "pet

tools," pleasurable idea-generators with which he avoided the deadening seriousness of the

world.[18] Duchamp was therefore in the habit of crediting "amusement" as the motivation behind

the anti-art gestures of his oeuvre. The artist's readymades seem to elicit the cognitive shift or

shock we come to expect from jokes.[19] Richter figures the "shock value" in the readymades,

including the inevitable expiry of this shock, as a cure for fetishism in the art world. The

readymades exemplified an "art-for-a-day" ethos,[20] one that would (paradoxically it seems)

reverberate in humorous art activities of the 1960s. For example, the emphasis on "gags" in the

Fluxus movement can be understood in this way, given their immediate goal of injecting a

"much-needed *spirit of play*" and ephemerality into an art world dominated by "solemn and

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[16] Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 216.

[17] Quoted in Darragh O'Donoghue, "Daze of the Rabblement: Early Film Comedy and Some Modernists," *Senses of Cinema* 33 (October 2004), http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/comedy-and-perception/early_comedy_modernists/.

[18] Quoted in Katharine Kuh, "Marcel Duchamp," in *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 90.

[19] For an argument along these lines see R. Bruce Elder, "The Structural Film: Ruptures and Continuities in Avant-Garde Film," in *Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. David Hopkins (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2006), 130.

[20] Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 208.

tendentious affairs" like abstract expressionism and serialism.[21] Fluxus is, of course, another key context in which to view Ono's *Film No. 4*.

HUMOUR AS MODERN ART CONDITION

At times, theorists have been tempted to position humour as a pervasive, underlying condition of art, one which is laid bare by the compulsively self-reflexive artists of the modern period. Theodor W. Adorno touches on this aspect in his *Aesthetic Theory*, writing that, "It is in [the] consciousness of the untruth of the true that all art participates in humor, as do above all the dark works of modernism."[22] Adorno associates the aesthetic mixture of one-in-the-same belief and disbelief with Huizinga's theories of play, further drawing a speculative link to the latent humour of ancient ritual. In his essay on the "dehumanization" of modern art, Ortega Y Gasset singles out "waggishness" as a contemporary attitude in aesthetics:

> The waggery may be more or less refined, it may run the whole gamut from open clownery to a slight ironical twinkle, but it is always there. And it is not that the content of the work is comical—that would mean a relapse into a mode or species of the "human" style—but that, whatever the content, the art itself is jesting. To look for fiction as fiction—which, we have said, modern art does—is a proposition that cannot be executed except with one's tongue in one's cheek.[23]

Ortega mentions here the "facetious quality" of Cubism, which resonates as a self-reflexive taunt to the fiction of art. There is much evidence to suggest that, for reasons similar to the above, art critics of the turn of the century looked suspiciously on developments in modernism. As Jeffrey Weiss has documented in painstaking detail, the art press in *fin de siècle* Paris was on guard for instances of "hoax" within an art world then being saturated with new styles and isms. In

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[21] Dick Higgins, "Fluxus Theory and Reception," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chicester, West Sussex; New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 225.

[22] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, and Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum, 1997), 318.

[23] José Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art," in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*, trans. Helen Weyl (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 47.

particular, critics could anticipate instances of *blague* (a posture of weightless, deadpan irony) and *mystification* (carrying the same meaning in French as in English), popular comic strategies that had circulated in such Montmarte groups as the Incohérents and the Hydropathes.[24] "In contemporary art, *blague* is erected as a principle," wrote the critic Henri Guilbeaux in 1911. "We have been too benevolent in our recent acceptance of *fumistes*; it is now necessary to hunt them down and prevent them from accomplishing their nefarious mission."[25] Weiss makes a convincing case for *blague* and *mystification* as predicates for Duchamp's confidence games with art, strategies of hoax that underwrite Duchamp's attempts to escape "all species of faith, conviction and dogmatism."[26] The reader will not be surprised to find Duchamp's influence throughout this dissertation, for instance, in the chapter on the evasive maneuvers of "structural" filmmaker Michael Snow.

A parallel consideration is the attitude of popular audiences towards the avant-garde, or towards modern art generally. Need I rehearse the cliché of the layperson's mocking approach to the modern artist's eccentricity? It is an old one, at least as old as the reports that nineteenth-century Parisians visited the Salon des Refusés to laugh at the artwork.[27] Did they not understand that the joke was on them? Fabled bad-faith transactions of this kind play out again in the discourse around underground cinema, as I will soon detail. Incidentally, a rather funny film has been made of the popular response to avant-garde cinema: Mel Brooks' Oscar-winning short *The Critic* (1963). Brooks presents us with a Norman McLaren-esque experimental animation of abstract shapes, over which we begin to hear the running commentary of a septuagenarian

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[24] Jeffrey S. Weiss, *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp and Avant-Gardism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 110. For more on Montmarte humour see Janet Whitmore, "Irreverent, Illicit, Incoherent: Belle Epoque Comedy," in *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2010), 61–80.
[25] Quoted in Weiss, *The Popular Culture of Modern Art*, 111.
[26] Weiss, 125.
[27] Cottington, *The Avant-Garde*, 8.

audience member (Brooks himself, burlesquing a Russian-Jewish accent) who has evidently

stumbled into the wrong auditorium. "What the hell is dis? . . . Dis is cute, dis is cute, dis is nice

– what the hell is it? Oh, I know what it is. It's garbage, dat's what it is . . . What is dat? Looks

like a bug . . . Could dis be the sex life of two 'things'? . . . I don't know much about

psychoanalysis but I'd say this is a dirty picture." Lesser known is the avant-garde's own low-

key version of this film, Michael Snow's *Seated Figures* (1988), a prolonged series of "trucking"

shots over pavement, streams, and grass, which incorporates into its soundtrack the noise of a

running projector, and of an audience sporadically laughing, yawning, murmuring ("Where ya

going?"), all of which will play havoc with the viewer's sense of sound in the immediate

surroundings of a theatre environment. The film ends when a pair of hands disrupts the image

with a shadow puppet of a bird.

THE AVANT-GARDE AND POPULAR CULTURE: THE INFLUENCE OF SLAPSTICK

COMEDY

> Cinema, in so far as it not only, like poetry, represents the successive stages of life, but
> also claims to show the passage from one stage to the next, and in so far as it is forced to
> present extreme situations to move us, had to encounter humor almost from the start.
>   - André Breton[28]

>   [. . .] Is the label
> 'experimental film'
>   to say that we cannot deny
> the cinema is still an
>   unknown, only hinted at
>   by hindsight, fantasy, dreams,
> hallucinations, comedy?
>   - Stan Vanderbeek[29]

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[28] André Breton, "Lightning Rod," in *Anthology of Black Humor*, ed. André Breton, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), xvii.
[29] Stan Vanderbeek, "The Cinema Delimina: Films from the Underground," *Film Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1961): 15.

The avant-gardes have an historically ambivalent and complex relationship with popular culture. Thomas Crow suggests that the avant-gardes sit somewhere between high art and low, popular culture, channeling energies from and mounting resistances to each, productively confusing the two spheres.[30] Rendezvous with commodity culture were not uncommon to avant-gardists of the turn of the century, resulting in appropriations that acted at once as inoculations against popular culture – e.g., Baudelaire's provisional "empathy with the commodity," as noted by Walter Benjamin[31] – and as transgressions against bourgeois norms. Malcolm Turvey writes of a "comedic modernism" wherein artists become fascinated with new forms of humour in popular entertainment, inspired by their anti-social and –traditional aesthetics, culminating in the avant-gardes' celebration of slapstick film comedy.[32] This latter is one of the direct lines of continuity between the early twentieth-century European avant-gardes and the American field that concerns us here.

The literature on the connection between the avant-gardes and slapstick is impressive, offering a number of reasons for why Dadaists and Surrealists were drawn to early slapstick comedy. Turvey's essay attributes the appeal of this "low" genre to such factors as its rejection of bourgeois psychologizing, its incongruous gag structures, its satire of social conventions, and its release of instinctual, rebellious energies in both human bodies and objects.[33] The autonomy of objects in slapstick – "a kind of surreal agency to the décor" – appealed in particular to Luis

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[30] Thomas E. Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 3–37.

[31] Walter Benjamin, "Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,'" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings -- Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Suhrkamp Verlag (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 111.

[32] Malcolm Turvey, "Comedic Modernism," *October* 160 (Spring 2017): 5–29.

[33] Malcolm Turvey, "The Child in the Machine: On the Use of CGI in Michael Snow's **Corpus Callosum*," *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 29.

Buñuel's sensibilities, as James Lastra has shown[34]; added to that, the vulgar Americanness of comedians like Buster Keaton was worn as a badge of anti-tradition by Buñuel and other Surrealists. Tom Gunning argues that the "exhibitionism" and "direct stimulation" of early cinema comedy were seized by avant-gardists as novel, intensified forms of audience engagement; once more the object was to overthrow bourgeois conventions, here concerning the creation of a realist diegesis that would maintain the fourth wall protecting the bourgeois spectator. Thus, as Gunning states, the "cinema of attractions" does not vanish with the subsequent standardization of the culture industries (with their institution of classical-realist drama), but rather the emancipatory potential of this early cinema goes "underground" into the avant-gardes.[35]

The envoys of the slapstick mentality in the "first" American avant-garde cinema (roughly, 1940s-50s) are Sidney Peterson and James Broughton, both stationed in San Francisco, in the beginning collaborators on the surrealistic *The Potted Psalm* (1946). The madhouse bodily displays of *The Potted Psalm* (tongue flicking, garish smiling) have the rude exhibitionism of silent-comedy-by-way-of-Surrealism, while a fractured form of slapstick chase structures Peterson's *The Petrified Dog* (1948). Discussing the slapstick inheritance of Peterson and Broughton, respectively, critic P. Adams Sitney notes the former's interest in the humour of incongruous images or the irrational collision of ideas, and the latter's devotion to the comedy of uninhibited, childlike character.[36] The most visible token of Broughton's comedian-driven

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[34] James Lastra, "Buñuel, Bataille, and Buster, or, the Surrealist Life of Things," *Critical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (July 2009): 25.

[35] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3 & 4 (1986): 63–70. Another attempt to grapple with the inheritance of so-called "primitive" cinema in avant-garde film is Noël Burch, "Primitivism and the Avant-Gardes," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 483–506.

[36] P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 54. Elsewhere, Peterson claims a debt to the humour of Mark Twain, particularly Twain's notion on the Americanness of tales "humorous" as opposed to "comic" (English) and "witty" (French), that is, a difference in

humour is the frolicking, Chaplinesque scamp at the centre of *Loony Tom, the Happy Lover*

(1951). Below, we will see how Broughton's interest in comic performance – the gathering of, in

Sitney's terms, "a group of performers ready for anything, free to romp and spontaneously create

a comic situation"[37] – carries into underground film of the 1960s. We will also explore in greater

depth Peterson's sense of the "preposterous" comic possibilities of film, which we can here

relate to what Annette Michelson has called the "ludic sovereignty" over space and time that

lures avant-gardists to cinema.[38] Sticking with Michelson's notion, we can cite fast-motion

"undercranking" and "trick" photography as two more slapstick, spatiotemporal jolts recovered

in the cameraplay of the American avant-gardes. Trick photography is indeed an underexplored

aspect of avant-garde humour in this dissertation. Its pleasures are on display in such second-

generation offerings as Anne Severson's *I Change I Am the Same* (1969), a short-and-sweet film

of pixellated costume change and gender reversal; and Gunvor Nelson's *Take Off* (1972), a

grotesquely funny film of striptease-dismemberment, which recalls the macabre magic shows of

Georges Méliès (with a feminist twist), as well as a whole tradition of corporeal disfigurements

in silent comedienne comedy.[39]

We have seen how slapstick's disintegrative character and emphasis on direct stimulation

attracted the avant-gardes. The fact that slapstick carried the virtues of a *young* art warrants

further comment. Slapstick's playful disregard for spatiotemporal laws is one sign of its youthful

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the *manner* versus the *matter* of telling: "To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and
sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the American
art." Mark Twain quoted in Sidney Peterson, *The Dark of the Screen* (New York: Anthology Film Archives; New
York University Press, 1980), 33. See also Peterson's admission that an "*esprit montmartrois*" permeated San
Francisco art scenes. Peterson, 101.
[37] Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 73.
[38] Annette Michelson, "The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval," in *Montage and
Modern Life, 1919-1942*, ed. Matthew Teitelbaum (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), 65.
[39] I owe my sense of this tradition to Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick & Silent Film Comediennes* (New
York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

spirit; another is the childishness of many slapstick comedians.[40] Both fit the avant-gardes'

pursuit of regression to pre-rational states as a privileged means to remake art, and through it,

society.

To once more adopt a wide view of the modern art landscape, it is not only novelty that

spurs radical changes in art, but moreover the value of youthfulness. Renato Poggioli's *Theory of*

the Avant-Garde marks the "[e]xaltation of youth" that leads some sectors of avant-garde

practice along a path of continuous regression: "from youthful freshness to adolescent

ingenuousness, to boyish prankishness, to childishness" and carrying down into "infantilism."[41]

Peter Bürger agrees that this "longing for regression is an eminently modern phenomenon," and

specifies it as "a reaction to the advancing rationalization process," thus an irrationality which

may prove valuable in political struggle.[42] José Ortega Y Gasset situates youthfulness – or, as he

aptly specifies, "boyishness"[43] – at the bottom of modern art's waggery and "negative mood of

mocking aggressiveness" towards art values of the past.[44] Ortega takes this as a sign not only that

art traditions are being liquidated, but that the idea of "salvation" through art is no longer

seriously pursued, except as it pertains to the redemption of youth in a world ossified with

tradition.

CHILDISHNESS AND "THE MORALITY IN THE NEW" IN UNDERGROUND

CINEMA

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[40] Malcolm Turvey argues that childishness is one of the major thematic throughlines joining Romanticism to modernism to postmodernism. Turvey, "The Child in the Machine," 36.
[41] Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968), 35.
[42] Peter Bürger, *The Decline of Modernism*, trans. Nicholas Walker (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 41.
[43] Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art," 50.
[44] Ortega y Gasset, 44.

We can now collect several of the threads above to make a preliminary case study of humour in the 1960s underground film. Childish performance is an outstanding feature of this humour.[45] Underground "stars" like Jack Smith and Taylor Mead were hailed in the underground press (that is, by Jonas Mekas) as the equals of Chaplin in their onscreen clowning.[46] Mead can be found napping on a public statue in *The Flower Thief* (1962), à la Chaplin in *City Lights* (1931), a gag which had received more direct homage in James Broughton's *Mother's Day* (1948). Smith and Mead far surpass Chaplin in their childishness, however, combining it with aggressive and antic traits, "veering between paranoid compulsion and unfettered euphoria."[47] Mead performs the child by toting around a teddy bear in *The Flower Thief*; yet this is not a sign of blissful innocence, for Mead is capable of being, as Jack Sargeant puts it, "anarchically sexual" with the bear.[48] The screeching delivery and playroom dress-up of Jack Smith in *Blonde Cobra* (1963) are outward signs of regression pierced with a monologue about suicidal thoughts and sexual agony (the immortal line: "Sex is a pain in the ass – sex is *the* pain in the ass!"). Sharing an enclosed space in *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963), Smith and Mead tangle and scale each other in a childish bacchanal replete with costume play, crotch fixation, giddy paroxysms, and licking. Such mixtures encourage us to look at ingredients other than silent comedy in the makeup of underground performance; there is a risk here of conflating

[45] Carel Rowe offers three reasons for the primacy of performance in underground film: Andy Warhol's trademark stationary camera liberated the performer to provide the meaning of films; the innovations of experimental theatre groups like the Living Theatre and Theatre of the Ridiculous crossed over into underground cinema; and Jonas Mekas cultivated the underground "star" system in his critical writings. Carel Rowe, *The Baudelairean Cinema: A Trend within the American Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982), 5. See also Wheeler Winston Dixon, "Performativity in 1960s American Experimental Cinema: The Body as Site of Ritual and Display," *Film Criticism* 23, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 48–60.

[46] For comments on the Chaplinesque in Smith and Mead, respectively, see Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 108 and 128. In connection to Mead's performance style, Mekas raises the probably more accurate name of Harry Langdon, the childish-man comedian (128).

[47] Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History*, 1st Da Capo Press ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 56. From this same book, see the chapter "superstar space: the playroom" (51-59), in which Tyler analyzes the underground's infantilism, improvisational tendencies, and connection to the youth movement. Tyler also makes a comparison between the underground and Dada (unfavourable to the former).

[48] Jack Sargeant, *Naked Lens: An Illustrated History of Beat Cinema* (London: Creation Books, 2001), 136.

childishness with the queer humour of these performers. Aspects of this queerness are explored below. Important to note before continuing is how the chaotic principle of slapstick, the coming to pieces of situations, also plays out on the level of aesthetic qualities in underground films: the films are roughly shot, use expired stock, make spontaneous edits in-camera, and so on. This too can be figured in terms of regression, though again it has sources outside of slapstick. Naïve as the performative and technical humour of these films may appear, one strongly senses an *ambition* to be destructive as an undercurrent to the improvised play. Baudelaire (of whom, more to come) furnishes us with an apt term for the seemingly innocent, yet secretly ambitious humour of children: he calls them "budding Satans."[49]

(Image 1: *Loony Tom, the Happy Lover*)   (Image 2: *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*)

There may be several reasons why the childishness of the underground, and relatedly, its shambolic technical qualities, did not exactly endear these films to the wider public. To account for the fact that the underground film, which often seemed to be mocking itself and tearing itself apart, received a reactionary dose of mockery in some quarters (a laugh at, rather than with), we might cite its anti-aesthetic ("home movie") style, or its discomfiting queerness. Underground film was also raised to the public conscious (in a manner of speaking) by an aggressive

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[49] Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon Press, 1995), 156.

publicity/propaganda machine, fronted by Jonas Mekas, particularly in his column for the *Village Voice*. Thus, we have Mekas mainly to credit for one aspect of the avant-gardism of the underground – that is, Mekas seized the "demagogic moment"[50] which has historically been the prerogative of avant-garde self-promotional efforts. Mekas' "Notes on the New American Cinema," a precursor to his full-fledged promotion of the underground cinema, contains many instances of standard issue avant-garde millennialism, familiar phrases on the visionary and prophetic nature of the new film artists, and the coming defeat of the old. Mekas here proposes "a *morality in the new*," the only way out of the spirit-imprisoning "cul-de-sac of western culture."[51] That this would lead Mekas not only to aggrandize but also moralize the immaturity and clear-cut failure of the underground – to promote its regression as an *advance* – was irksome to many, ridiculous to others.

As I have said, the demagoguery of Mekas (and those who joined him) justifies our thinking of the underground as an avant-garde; so too does the underground's obsession with failure. To use Matei Călinescu's reading,

> The avant-gardist, far from being interested in novelty as such, or in novelty in general, actually tries to discover or invent new forms, aspects, or possibilities of *crisis*. Aesthetically, the avant-garde attitude implies the bluntest rejection of such traditional ideas as those of order, intelligibility, and even success (Artaud's 'No more masterpieces!' could be generalized): art is supposed to become an experience – deliberately conducted – of failure and crisis.[52]

The following section delves into the discourse on underground failure, and seeks to understand it through the lens of humour. It is crucial to remember, after Shaun May, that the notion of

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[50] Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 34.
[51] Jonas Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 104.
[52] Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), 124.

failing in some task always implies "the possibility of success"[53]; underground filmmakers

remain highly aware, and often downright scornful, of models of success in conducting their

failures. By contrasting the underground's proselytizing of failure with the self-amused and

hostile (or table-turning) reactions this failure receives in the non-Mekasite press, I hope to give

an idea of the polarizing nature of underground humour, of the unstable positions the viewer

might occupy in parsing this humour's meanings and pleasures.

FAILING UNDERGROUND

> Old cinema, even when it is successful, is horrible; New Cinema, even when it fails, is beautiful.
>   – Jonas Mekas[54]

> Mans' stupidity hopelessness and absurdity are beautiful things, for they are the mothers of Joy. [sic]
>   – Ron Rice[55]

Jonas Mekas, the mouthpiece of 1960s underground cinema, was a notorious apologist

for failed aesthetics. To outside observers and erstwhile patrons, "willful technical crudity"[56] was

arguably *the* salient aesthetic feature of the underground film, no doubt linked in the public

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[53] Shaun May, *A Philosophy of Comedy on Stage and Screen: You Have to Be There* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), 7–8.

[54] Quoted in Amos Vogel, "13 Confusions," in *From the Third Eye: The Evergreen Review Film Reader*, ed. Ed Halter and Barney Rosset (New York; Oakland; London: Seven Stories Press, 2018), 60.

[55] Ron Rice, "Ron Rice: Diaries, Notebooks, Documents," *Film Culture* 39 (Winter 1965): 105.

[56] See Susan Sontag's comments on "willful technical crudity" in the films of Jack Smith, Ron Rice, et al. Susan Sontag, "Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 228. Fred Camper recollects a "short talk" given by Mekas about "the technical innovations in avant-garde cinema that have sprung out of equipment malfunction or filmmaker error." Fred Camper, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," *Millennium Film Journal* 16–18 (Fall/Winter 1987/1986): 106.

    In the mid-50s, early in his career as a film critic, Mekas himself attacked experimental films for their "technical crudity and thematic narrowness," citing their "generally poor photographic quality, the[ir] lack of control of the sound track and color, the[ir] looseness in construction." Mekas' recommendation is for a midway point between Hollywood and experimental films, where artists "acquire a more solid technical and theoretical background." Jonas Mekas, "The Experimental Film in America," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, Praeger Film Books (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 25. In a post-script to this essay's republication in 1970 (or, after his "conversion" to experimental film), Mekas rightly notes how closely his mid-50s criticisms resemble those launched by critics of the avant-garde in subsequent decades (26).

imagination with degenerate social and sexual themes, as in the perversely shabby *succès de scandale* of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963). A common move in Mekas' critical writing in the 60s was to defend crudity of technique – "the mistakes, the out-of-focus shots, the shaky shots, the unsure steps, the hesitant movements, the over-exposed and under-exposed bits" – as a revolution in cinematic vocabulary, "part of the psychological and visual reality of modern man," and the necessary outcome of a world cluttered with confusion.[57] This inversion of cinematic standards drove Mekas increasingly underground, or away from the kind of New American Cinema he initially championed – such works of relative technical accomplishment and commercial prospects as John Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1959) and Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank's seminal "Beat" film *Pull My Daisy* (1959), the respective recipients of the first two Independent Film Awards handed out by Mekas' journal *Film Culture*. Where Mekas had once celebrated *Pull My Daisy* for the immediacy of its camerawork, its "effectively break[ing] with the accepted and 1,000-years-old official rules of slick polished Alton Y Co. cinematographic schmaltz,"[58] by 1963 he would associate this same film with a "New York realist school" preoccupied with "'surface' meanings and social engagement."[59] In the place of the realist school came what Mekas termed the "Baudelairean Cinema," whose signal works included Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, and such other "torn and tortured," "delicate and dirty" films as Ken Jacobs' *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1959-63) and *Blonde Cobra* (made with Jack Smith and Bob Fleischner), and Ron Rice's *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*. In Mekas' heraldic

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[57] Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," 105.

[58] P. Adams Sitney, ed., "Appendix: The Independent Film Award," in *Film Culture Reader*, Praeger Film Books (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 424. The text for this announcement is unsigned, but one presumes from the language that Mekas wrote it.

[59] Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 91.

phraseology, these were the tarnished emblems of a "cinema of disengagement and new freedom."[60]

Mekas' "Baudelairean Cinema" essay does not foreground technical crudity per se, but a closer look at his roster of Baudelaireans reveals their shared commitment to failure. Ron Rice's picaresque debut film *The Flower Thief* had been previously hailed in these terms by Mekas: "It is the simplest, the humblest movie there can be. It is almost as innocent and idiotic in its techniques as it is in its content."[61] As Mekas wrote, *The Flower Thief*'s sloppy technique was like the childlike idiocy of its star, Taylor Mead, and such innocence as this was critic-proof.[62] As Mead later explained, the genesis of *The Flower Thief* in fact came from a screening of *Pull My Daisy*. The actor's comments gesture to a change in aesthetic orientation similarly charted in Mekas' "Baudelairean Cinema":

> I attended [*Pull My Daisy*] with Ron Rice, and we both picked up on how interesting and easy it was to respond to our surroundings in real life and even transfer to cinema. Though the "professionalism" and cost of *Pull My Daisy* was even beyond our financial and mentally competent or inclined disposition. We thought we could make a "worse" film, and it would cost a fraction of the well-lit and correlated *Pull My Daisy*. What I think we bought especially was the philosophy within the film . . . that this was the new way to do things, including live. And in film Ron Rice's basic advice to film-makers was "Push the button."[63]

As it happens, *Pull My Daisy* was never as anti-professional as Mekas initially made it out to be: the filmmakers had obeyed certain industrial protocols, such as slating shots, rehearsing scenes, and following a shooting schedule[64]; besides that, the film had been bankrolled by Wall Street

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[60] Mekas, 91. For an admirable attempt to expand the premise of Baudelaireanism in these films (Mekas does not), see Rowe, *The Baudelairean Cinema*. Mekas likely takes his cue from a quotation of Baudelaire in *Blonde Cobra*.

[61] Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 69.

[62] See also Ronald Tavel's comments on Ron Rice: "What would seem at first to be creative handicaps were, paradoxically, some of the strongest factors working in his favor: poor reasoning, lack of education, literary and logical ignorance, and absence of narrational continuity." Ronald Tavel, "Silver Scum," *Aspen* 3 (December 1966).

[63] Quoted in Wheeler W. Dixon, *Cinema at the Margins* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2013), 49.

[64] Co-director Alfred Leslie stated that *Pull My Daisy* was "no more random or improvised than Antonioni or Rossellini . . . the set was dressed . . . Copies of the script were made for the cast. Suggestions were made as to what to wear. A shooting schedule was planned . . . Each scene was marked and slated. Each scene was rehearsed and

investors hoping to make a quick buck off the beatnik "fad."[65] Mekas' remark about the

"'surface' meanings" of *Pull My Daisy* may be some indication that he recognized a

superficiality in previous anti-establishment cinema, and what remained was for filmmakers like

Rice and Smith to initiate a total upheaval of values, to exhibit, as Mekas said of *The Flower*

Thief, "the utmost disrespect for the 'professional' camera, plot, character conventions."[66]

How can humour be situated in this aesthetic of failure? Certainly, to look at the films of

Mekas' "Baudelairean Cinema" there is much evidence of humour, for example, in the antics of

the "star" comedians at the centre of the films, in the hysterical clowning of Jack Smith, Taylor

Mead, Jerry Sims. It is not so simple to attribute humour to the anti-professionalism of the films

– if, that is, we mean to credit their technical shoddiness with a knowing satire of industry

models. Perhaps this is closest to being the case with underground filmmakers like brothers

George and Mike Kuchar (not among Mekas' Baudelaireans, but credits to the underground

cause all the same), a sizeable part of whose cinematic output could be fairly described as a

travesty or amateurization of Hollywood productions. George Kuchar has always been the first to

emphasize the points at which his films fail to pass the test of quality control. In his text "Tips on

Directing," Kuchar provides the aspiring underground director with DIY solutions to the

unavoidable disasters of no-budget filmmaking: come to the set unprepared, so that you won't

throw a tantrum when your plans predictably fall to ruin; if fabric for costumes is scarce, use

trash bags to make "futuristic gowns" (but beware of the "squeaking and razzing noises" these

trash bags emit when actors perspire under hot lights); if a performer is having trouble

shot three times." Quoted in J. Hoberman, "Pull My Daisy / The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man," in *The American New Wave: 1958-1967*, ed. Melinda Ward and Bruce Jenkins (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center; Media Study/Buffalo, 1982), 37.

[65] See David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 92.

[66] Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," 101. To be fair, Mekas does specify that *The Flower Thief* "combine[s] the spontaneous cinema of *Pull My Daisy*, the freedom of the image of Brakhage, the 'uncleanliness' of action painting, the theater of Happenings (Kaprow) and the sense of humor of Zen" (101).

expressing emotions, simply paint the desired emotions on the face; if, on the other hand, "the

performer needs a face-lift, hang the person upside down while doing close-ups. Gravity will

then do the job of pulling all that meat scalpward."[67] Budding undergroundistes, says Kuchar,

can expect their reels to be dropped on the ground, collecting dust and hair that takes on a life of

its own during projection; likewise, scratches will accumulate on the film, giving the appearance

of dangling the performers by puppet strings. Alas, "This is cinematography."[68] In a separate

text, Kuchar wonders if it was not the inevitable failures of professional cinema in its instance of

projection – i.e., "the fact that film gets dirty and scratched or the reels are accidentally play out

of sequence" – which first sensitized avant-garde filmmakers to the potentials of their medium.[69]

Kuchar's example should not, however, lead one to conclude that underground

filmmakers were toying with failure as a mere stylistic appurtenance, designed to undermine

notions of the professional. There was a shared belief among these filmmakers, traceably ironic

but no less deeply felt, that something terribly new and beautiful could be born of ramshackle

necessity. Ken Jacobs, for instance, has spoken sincerely, even militantly, on behalf of failure as

an aesthetically generative principle. Jacobs recounts a bonding moment between him and

frequent collaborator Jack Smith: "We both became interested in shit . . . and the energy that was

allowed when you came to the junctures of shit . . . mindless banal crap could break open and

give off fantastic aesthetic energy."[70] Out of this interest Jacobs and Smith cultivated their

"Human Wreckage" aesthetic, as here described by Jacobs:

> We were obsessed by the quality of failure. My film, *Star Spangled to Death*, is a
> testament to failure. Jack and I had a horror of life, a deep disgust with existence. Jack

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[67] George Kuchar, "Tips on Directing / More Tips / Teaching Film," *Wide Angle* 14, no. 3 / 4 (October 1992): 13.
[68] Kuchar, 15.
[69] Kuchar quoted in "Millennium Survey," *Millennium Film Journal* 35/36 (Fall 2000): 56.
[70] Quoted in David Ehrenstein, *Film: The Front Line, 1984* (Denver: Arden Press, Inc, 1984), 38. Jacobs presumably does not mean shit as in excrement. For a look at the Kuchar brothers' interest in excrement, however, see Juan A. Suárez, "The Kuchars, the 1960s and Queer Materiality," *Screen* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 25–45.

indulged in it spitefully, he would plunge himself into the garbage of life. He had a
hilarious and horrifying willingness to "revel in the dumps," to create some sort of
"garbage culture."
[. . .]
All life was garbage, hopelessness; we were disgusted by the price of existence, in a puke
from suffering. Our joy was dependent on the suffering and sorrows of the world.[71]

Working with failed shit and garbage has two apparent advantages for Jacobs: first, it effectively

registers a "deep disgust with existence"; second, it converts this disgust into joy and hilarity by

releasing "fantastic aesthetic energy" from the broken wreckage of life. Such joy cannot be

properly understood so long as it is ascribed to an anti-professional or -technical prankishness.

Instead, it seems wiser to recall Nietzsche's declaration, that art alone redeems us by converting

our "nauseous thoughts of the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can

live," among which notions are "the *comic* as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity."[72]

To be in the absurd position of wrenching art from life's broken shit – a way of discharging the

nausea of absurdity – is to redeem life, aesthetically and comically. Jacobs actively pursued

brokenness as a working principle for his magnum opus *Star Spangled to Death* (begun 1956;

completed 2004), a film Jacobs desired to be "constantly breaking." For example, the manic

performances of Jack Smith and Jerry Sims in sections of *Star Spangled to Death* act like

"bodies of chaos" to break up situations and events which Jacobs has pre-patterned. What

emerges from this breaking up of structure is, for Jacobs, "the most vibrant moment of life," a

true revealing of structure in the moment of its destruction, a gasp of energy at the point of

failure.[73]

Needless to say, not everyone derived such satisfaction from the underground's failures.

It did not help matters that Mekas, under the banner of the "morality in the new," promoted

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[71] Quoted in Rowe, *The Baudelairean Cinema*, 39.
[72] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans.
Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 60.
[73] See Jacobs' remarks on this film in Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 319–20.

failed aesthetics as a principle of salvation. Critic Andrew Sarris, sworn opponent of experimental film (but otherwise friendly with Mekas), singled out Mekasite propaganda as the main source of his enmity: "I wish to dissociate myself from a primitive movement which fancies itself the moral guardian of cinema. I can take the ineptness, but not the cynical exploitation of the ineptness."[74] In the pages of *Film Culture,* Parker Tyler decried the Beat success of *Pull My Daisy* for its rejection of artistic tradition – worse still, a rejection the filmmakers treated as a "soap-boxer's arrogation" and a naked bid for the "spotlight of publicity." Tyler's definition of the Beat attitude prefigures criticisms Tyler would make of the underground cinema more generally:

> A built-in nonself-criticism, defying criticism by anyone or any standards. Grim and gory (by token), carefree, airy, ecstatic, blah, or flat-footed, in bad taste or ephemerally inspired, professionalized or 'at home,' it's to be enjoyed because it 'had to be,' and if not enjoyable, it's you who don't 'belong,' not it.[75]

Given this moralism of freedom, a freedom to fail in any which way one pleases ("Dig us," as Ron Rice would say[76]), it should be expected that the underground's inflated self-image would find itself on the butt-end of humour, a foolish object to be laughed at rather than with.

Indeed, the "impoverished" aesthetics of the underground – inseparable from the zealous promotion of same by Mekas and company – made the movement an easy target for mockery in the popular press. Inevitably, *MAD Magazine* was among the first outlets to score points on the eccentric novelty of the underground – née New American – cinema. Included in *MAD*'s December 1963 "Guide to Art Films" is a parody entitled *Pluck My Chicken*, lampooning Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's foundational Beat film and cornerstone of the N.A.C., *Pull My Daisy*.

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[74] Andrew Sarris, "Movie Journal: Hello and Goodbye to the New American Cinema," *The Village Voice*, September 20, 1962.
[75] Parker Tyler, "For *Shadows*, Against *Pull My Daisy*," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, Praeger Film Books (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 110.
[76] Rice, "Ron Rice: Diaries, Notebooks, Documents," 121.

The "Guide" takes a further potshot at Amos Vogel's Cinema 16, here listed as a venue that might host the work of a fictitious film society called "The Blurred Exposure Pioneers."[77] In a brief *New Yorker* profile from July of the same year, the exploits of Jonas Mekas and the Film-Makers' Cooperative are treated in amused, lightly patronizing fashion. Mekas and his ilk are characterized as inveterate avant-gardists, "both angry and hungry" (making a cameo appearance, Ken Jacobs calls himself "just thirty and very angry"), while sections of the profile emphasize the sorry state of the Cooperative's offices and the economic desperation that lurks behind the aesthetic "discoveries" of underground filmmaking. One suspects Mekas himself is responsible for the promotion of penury in this article, though credit the columnist alone for this attempt to capture the charmingly self-defeating ethos of the Coop, riffing on a catalogue synopsis for Stan Brakhage's *Sirius Remembered* (1959): "'A dead dog decays in four interrelated, dreamlike sequences.' It can be rented for ten dollars."[78]

When not fixating on displays of nudity in underground cinema, mainstream press coverage found plenty of reason to gawk at the underground's peculiar, slipshod standards for what passed as advanced film art in the country. These same sliding standards were the subject of much controversy, opprobrium and, yes, mockery, from critics intimately connected to the experimental film community. Parker Tyler's highly ambivalent *Underground Film: A Critical History* (1969) portrays the "underdog [filmmaker] as not merely underprivileged in economic means but underprivileged also (despite subjective delusions) in talent and culture"; artists like Ron Rice and Jack Smith are offered as "outstanding examples of this pseudo-economic (or

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[77] Larry Siegel and George Woodbridge, "A MAD Guide to Art Films," *MAD Magazine*, December 1963. Incidentally, I was amused to come across this comment by Ken Jacobs, regarding his first encounter with the work of Jack Smith: "too patterned after Mad Comics, derivative and forced." Quoted in Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End* (New York: McPherson & Company, 1989), 156.
[78] Gerald Jonas, "Cinema Underground," *The New Yorker*, July 13, 1963, 17.

pseudo-aesthetic) viewpoint."[79] In a 1967 essay for *Evergreen* magazine, Amos Vogel, onetime purveyor of American avant-garde cinema under his Cinema 16 banner (bitterly deposed by Mekas as the figurehead of avant-garde film exhibition in New York City), attempts to clear the air of "13 Confusions" surrounding the Mekas-led propagation of New American Cinema in the 1960s. Vogel addresses the "the growing credibility gap between the movement's house organs and observed filmic quality."[80] Among the "Confusions" named by Vogel are those attitudes in the N.A.C. (read: underground) that confuse "freedom with formlessness," and "content with quality." Vogel remarks of the latter, "Thematic liberation is no guarantee of quality. Nor is the use of five simultaneously operating projectors, extreme nudity, unexceptional anti-Vietnam sentiments, hand-held cameras, portrayals of transvestism."[81]

Not every critic waited for the underground to reach a state of decadence and overcrowding before lodging their dissent. Edouard de Laurot, co-founder of *Film Culture* with Mekas and a collaborator on Mekas' early feature *Guns of the Trees* (1962), fired an early warning shot against the N.A.C.'s aesthetic slovenliness in the Spring 1962 issue of *Film Culture*. To de Laurot, the N.A.C. had thus far failed to "embody intention in artistic achievement," betraying a dearth of "talent, technique, and significance." Instead of leading the movement to self-examine, however, this failure "*begot a mystique of spontaneity: a protean doctrine intended to camouflage creative impotence, and provide an a posteriori self-justification.*"[82] Following de Laurot's essay is a satirical "Glossary of the New American Cinema," posed as a handy translation guide to the vocabulary used by filmmakers and boosters of the movement. Examples from the Glossary:

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[79] Tyler, *Underground Film*, 30.
[80] Vogel, "13 Confusions," 59.
[81] Vogel, 61.
[82] Edouard de Laurot, "The Future of the New American Cinema," *Film Culture* 24 (Spring 1962): 21. Italics original.

COMPETENCE: Synonym for corruption . . .
EXPERIENCE: A handicap . . .
FAILURE: Success . . .
SLICK: Properly photographed . . .
TRUTH: Opinion expressed behind another filmmaker's back

Some of the one-liners could be ripped from the pages of *MAD Magazine*: "EXPOSURE: That of which the frame has too much, and the finished film too little."[83] As amusing post-script to de Laurot, there is P. Adams Sitney's anecdote from his 1967 European tour of "The New American Cinema Exposition." In Norway, Sitney reports, de Laurot's Glossary had been published as a "highly pro-NAC retort to the commercial film mentality."[84] No doubt this is an object lesson in the perils of translating humour; could it also be an indication of the uncomfortable accuracy of de Laurot's satire – or perhaps a sign of the funny business, all along, in Mekas' promotional campaigns?

<div align="center">***</div>

These matters will be picked up again in Chapter 3, when it comes time to address more fully the underground's encounter with the monolithic professionalism of Hollywood. Some further notes on context can be made here. The Beats have already been named as an aesthetic and philosophical frame for the underground. Camp is another, and typically the lens through which the queerness of underground humour is figured. Janet Staiger argues it is a blend of the styles and politics of Beat and camp which results in "one general manifesto of desire" in the queer underground.[85] This manifesto can be viewed in the context of the youth movement and struggle against "the conformist 1950s," and up to a certain extent its gleeful attack on middle-

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[83] Edouard de Laurot et al., "Glossary of the New American Cinema," *Film Culture* 24 (Spring 1962): 22. The Glossary is co-authored by Daniel Drasin, Robert Duncan, and Charles Sterling.

[84] P. Adams Sitney, "The New American Cinema Exposition," *Film Culture* 46 (October 1967): 30.

[85] Janet Staiger, "Finding Community in the Early 1960s: Underground Cinema and Sexual Politics," in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, ed. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 45. For a further comparison of the Beats and camp, see Sargeant, *Naked Lens*, 106–7.

class mores could be appreciated by audiences hungry for subversion. Where this appreciation breaks down, suggests Staiger, is over the "studied effects" of failure or excess in the films, which for some are bound to distract or detract from the social thrust of the humour.[86] Where critics such as Vogel are concerned, writes Staiger, the attack on the underground's artistic merit has also to do with the perverse humour of camp, an "attitude" steeped in play and laughter that was not serious enough, simply "too gay—in the double sense of that term."[87] Once more we can turn to Vogel's remarks, this time on the publicity surrounding the censorship scandal of *Flaming Creatures*. While this publicity may have spiked curiosity in the underground, Vogel says, the films themselves failed to reward this curiosity with any serious aesthetic achievement. The public comes prepared for disappointments of this kind, Vogel claims, "lead[ing] many people to view the existing works and pretensions [of the underground] with an indulgent, amused air, smiling at the antics of the movement or somewhat repelled by the 'camp' atmosphere of its screenings."[88]

A closer reading and problematization of the question of camp will have to wait for Chapter 3. As a start in this direction, we might productively place camp alongside other efforts in 1960s art humour based in "self-persiflage," which Heike Munder defines as a form of self-mockery or -questioning that "draws strength from its own vulnerability," and "expand[s] itself into liberated spaces."[89] The trash-heap world of Jack Smith – his "defiant aesthetic lower-depthism"[90] – is one mode of flaunted self-degradation. Smith's worship of "moldy glamour" and "pasty art" eats away at the aesthetic boundaries around ugliness and imperfection. His

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[86] Staiger, "Finding Community," 54.

[87] Staiger, 58.

[88] Amos Vogel, "Flaming Creatures Cannot Carry Freedom's Torch," *The Village Voice*, May 7, 1964.

[89] Heike Munder, "Humour: The Secret of Aesthetic Sublimation (2005)," in *The Artist's Joke*, ed. Jennifer Higgie (London: Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel; MIT Press, 2007), 213. Munder has in mind such works as Carolee Schneemann's performance piece *Meat Joy* (1964).

[90] Stefan Brecht quoted in Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 24.

plunging into "artifacts of the recent past" assures the originality of his failure; he summons the fragrant aura around objects neither new nor old enough to invite our attention. Principles of progress and purity are here deliberately violated, and the artist is liberated by sinking into trash.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas might shed some light on this situation. Writing about "dirt" as a concept of the "primitive," Douglas contrasts it with the cleanness or ordering we come to expect of modern civilization: "Progress means differentiation. Thus primitive means undifferentiated; modern means differentiated. Advance in technology involves differentiation in every sphere, in techniques and materials, in productive and political roles."[91] Douglas frames differentiation in terms of "articulation." After a quote from Ehrenzweig, she argues that art does not participate in clean differentiations; rather, art pleases us through the perception of "inarticulate forms."[92] I would suggest the principle of "inarticulate form" is raised (or lowered) to a pitch of excessive failure in underground aesthetics, for previously discussed reasons having to do with disgust, non-conformism, and other resistances to modern life.

Failure, inarticulateness, regression – these are themes of humour loosely and directly tying the three chapters of this dissertation together. Given what has been said of the underground, it may come as something of a surprise that the first chapter covers so-called structural film. This late-60s outgrowth or pseudo-movement of the underground is often thought to have sanitized the underground spirit, to have killed its fun with intellectualized meanings and stabilized techniques. As I will argue, however, the self-reflexive humour of structural film can be theorized in continuity with the underground's projects, though with shifting accents and priorities, notably a stronger emphasis on the ironies of "successful" form. Structural filmmaker Joyce Wieland has cited a reason the underground was more inviting than the New York art

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[91] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 78.
[92] Douglas, 38.

world: "[the underground] was loose. You could make mistakes."[93] Though gesturing to "advanced" practices in the art world – such as minimalism – structural film retains a rooted interest in the failures of the underground, a compulsion to inhabit breaking points or outer limits of articulation.

The inclusion of a chapter on feminist video art would seem to require an even greater justification. Early video art of the 1960s and 70s had some institutional crossover with avant-garde film (e.g., Anthology Film Archives showed video programs in the 1970s), though video's ubiquity in gallery spaces suggests its humour ought to be taken as contextually separate.[94] Thematically, conceptually, and even aesthetically, however, I think feminist video humour can be discussed in terms not dissimilar from those mentioned above. The question of articulation, for example, is central to the feminist performance humour I explore in this chapter, tied explicitly to thinking around political goals and strategic positions. An amusing fact, to which we'll return, is that some avant-garde filmmakers, those who had little compunctions about their own raw styles, thought early black and white Portapak video too low-grade to use – a "failed" version of film! This encourages us to think about limit cases for "de-skilling" (to use a then-

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[93] Quoted in Lauren Rabinovitz, "Joyce Wieland and the Ascendancy of Structural Film," in *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71* (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 150.

[94] The other major context for video art is television, and perhaps the better part of early video humour can be seen as responsive to the big Other of TV. John Minkowsky's 1982 touring exhibition "Video/TV: Humor/Comedy" takes stock of this trend. In his catalogue introduction to the exhibition, Minkowsky notes striking parallels in the "experimental comedy" found in video art and on network television (he is thinking of comedians like Andy Kaufman, Steve Martin, and Michael O'Donoghue). Minkowsky asks what consequences this might render on dearly held distinctions between Art and Entertainment. Organizing the exhibition around eight programs of video art – with such themes as "Musical/Comedy," "Parody: Cultural TV Station," "Short Takes, One-Liners and Talking Heads," and "Docucomedy" – Minkowsky praises video comedy for its socially iconoclastic and aesthetically innovative registers, and for the ways it "combines the most engaging qualities of TV with the depth and purpose of art." John Minkowsky, "Introduction," in *Video/TV: Humor/Comedy: A Touring Video Exhibition of Media Study/Buffalo* (Buffalo, NY: Media Study/Buffalo, 1982), 3. It is worth noting that, of the approximately forty artists or artist groups represented in the exhibition, only five are women. Conspicuous is the absence of explicitly feminist video; as I will address in Chapter 2, feminist video humour is highly concerned with the representational and technological discourses of television.

current term) in the art scenes of the time. I hope the placement of my feminist video chapter is, therefore, generative of conversation and contradiction with other materials in this study.

Failure performs many functions in this dissertation. A study of humour and failure allows us to read avant-gardes formations together, not as a single, continuous avant-garde, but in their complexity and difference. Generally speaking, each of my chapters examines the humorous pleasures that emerge at junctures of failure; additionally, I am claiming that failure has a utopian aspect in most of my cases. But the look of this utopia, its outlines, aspirations, and critical registers, are not the same across all cases. In *The Queer Art of Failure,* Jack Halberstam writes that, "As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities."[95] Yet, practices of failure are not always so queer, and they can be, at one and the same time, destabilizing and protective of their own ideology, compelling a failure practice in response. This would seem to describe an avant-garde chain reaction. But I am thinking less of this game of historical oneupsmanship than of the tensions that exist within an era, such as those outlined in Chapter 1 between Michael Snow and feminist cultural and critical practices.

In this dissertation, I toy often with the idea that my objects fail to meet normative measures of success and polish. They then might look "funny" from a different, less sympathetic point of evaluation. While I don't think we can entirely ignore this normative standpoint, we should not dwell too long in its negativity. When José Esteban Muñoz writes of failure as a queer utopian practice, he insists that the term "failure" isn't meant to imply that the queer practices he explores aren't "strong or convincing." Rather, Muñoz wishes to "thematize failure as being something like the *always already* status of queers and other minoritatrian subjects in the

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[95] Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

dominant social order within which they toil. Queer failure . . . is more nearly about escape and a certain kind of virtuosity."[96] One of the central figures Muñoz has in mind is Jack Smith, whose work is riddled with failure, but is dazzling for all that. Chapter 3 of this dissertation returns to the work of Jack Smith, and other underground artists toiling with the discards of popular culture, to argue that what is humorous, and queer, about their failure has less to do with deficits than with surpluses of expressive means.

METHODOLOGY, ON HUMOUR

This dissertation blends discourse analysis and close readings of films and videos to uncover, or recover, humour as a presiding device, attitude, or value in select American avant-garde formations. I fully admit to the slipperiness of avant-garde humour as an object of investigation, and therefore wherever possible seek to buttress my identifications of humour with evidence that this humour has been positively identified by others. This is a way of allaying any suspicions on the reader's part that I may have an unreliably quixotic or comprehensive sense of what counts for humour. It is also a way of abiding the social and shareable nature of humour; as Simon Critchley writes, "humour is a shared or intersubjective practice that requires the assent of others."[97] This dissertation strives to piece together communities to which avant-garde humour communicates.

What do I mean by "humour" in this dissertation, and why do I tend to privilege it as a term above others, such as "comedy"? These are decidedly tricky questions to answer. On a basic level, my choice of the term humour has to do with its breadth of application, and its general acceptance in discourse. Academic conferences, in my experience, tend to organize

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[96] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 173.
[97] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 80.

around "humour" as a commodious theme, inviting reflections on corresponding topics like comedy, satire, irony, and the like. I have also found humour to be the most common term where the discourses around my avant-garde objects are concerned. Still, I recognize this does not solve the difficulty in the fact that terms like humour and comedy are often used interchangeably in the materials I'm drawing from. I hope, at least, to be clear that when I use the term "comedy," I have in mind a genre with elaborated structural features or global patterning (as Chapter 1 discusses), rather than the attitude or way of framing objects (and instances) which I largely take humour to be. If on occasion I slip up and conflate my terms (and use words like "joking" liberally), I hope the reader will – here it is again – humour me.

This dissertation does not present a strong theory of humour, but first of all seeks to understand how humour appears and functions in the avant-gardes. If I cannot avoid working from assumptions about what humour is (e.g., that it involves our amusement, and then not accidentally[98]; that humorous objects often herald "the return of the physical into the metaphysical"[99]), I am not compelled to choose among the "big three" theories of humour – Incongruity, Relief, and Superiority Theory – but inevitably draw from each, no doubt in unconscious ways. Each of these theories attempts to account for the source of our amusement in instances of humour, and each winds up illuminating the others; for example, we might laugh at incongruous combinations which nonetheless seem appropriate, but what is behind the reflex to laugh – has it provided us relief from some strained expectation, or has it given us the ego-boost

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[98] Jerrold Levinson writes, I think satisfactorily, "It is plausible to define humour in this way: *for something to be humorous is for it to be disposed to elicit mirth in appropriate people through their awareness or cognition of it, and not for ulterior reasons*. Mirth is not identical with the pleasurable perception of an incongruity, pleasure in feeling superior, the relief of tension or release of accumulated mental energy, or any combination of these elements. A better account of mirth is that it is a certain kind of pleasurable reaction which tends to issue in laughter if the reaction is sufficiently intense. So something is funny if it in itself pleases appropriate people through being grasped, where the pleasure is of the sort that leads, though not inevitably, to laughter." Jerrold Levinson, "Humour," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780415249126-M027-1. Emphasis mine.
[99] Critchley, *On Humour*, 43.

of a triumph over our perceptions? Is humour a quality of objects, or is it better thought as an attitude or emotion in subjects? Then again, how can these considerations be separated? Do subjective attitudes, emotions, or desires not pass into sensuous forms in what we call humour?

I wonder about the usefulness in asking abstract questions like these. As Shaun May has recently argued, the risk of over-theorizing humour is that you "de-world" instances of humour, the contexture of their, and our, being-in-the-world (May is constructing a philosophy of humour, believe it or not, from Heidegger).[100] May argues that a phenomenological-descriptive approach to humour can only enrich existing humour theories, by "re-worlding" them. For my part, while I follow assumptions about, for example, "attitudes" of humour – that it is, by turns, flexible, conservative, rebellious (e.g., Freud's definition of humour as a psychic stand against suffering[101]) – I try first to understand these attitudes in their specific modes and contexts of appearance. Where films are concerned, I use descriptions that attend to subtleties of tone, timing, and allusion, hoping the humour in this way reveals itself and drops us a hint as to what it's up to. From my film examples, I create conceptual scaffolding for (but hopefully not overdeterminations of) this humour, drawing on relevant sources: for example, Arthur Koestler's "bisociative" principle of humour, and its relation to scientific and artistic discoveries, will factor into my discussion of structural film; Lauren Berlant's thinking on "humourlessness," and Lewis Hyde's idea about humour's flexibility will help to position my chapter on feminist humour; Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody and various notions of camp humour inflect my readings of the pop cultural borrowings in Chapter 3. I will have failed if the reader does not get the slightest inkling of humour from my descriptions; does not experience an explosion of laughter, or,

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[100] May, *A Philosophy of Comedy*, 25.

[101] Sigmund Freud, "Humour," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, ed. John Morreall (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 111–16.

accepting the unlikelihood of that, at least a sudden tickle of spirit, perhaps an "inner smile" that

announces the guest of humour in our bodies.[102]

I have largely postponed the issue of laughter in this study, only truly and briefly

confronting it in my semi-autobiographical conclusion. My thinking around humour, once again,

inclines towards Heather Diack's observation on humour's "productive uncontainability"; it is

the interest of this dissertation to understand what this could mean in cases of avant-garde film

and video. I recognize that there is ample theoretical literature on *laughter*'s uncontainable and

disarticulating force, as in famous works by Georges Bataille, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Hélène

Cixous.[103] It seems we have only begun to unlock the potential obscured by centuries of

suspicion and interdiction regarding laughter in Western thought.[104] Still I am wary of pairing

humour and laughter, in part because of how the latter might constrain one's conception of

humour. I do not think laughter is humour's guarantee; our failure to burst out laughing, or to

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[102] It occurs to me that my descriptions might take on a humorous aspect incidental to the objects they try to describe (or is this wishful thinking?). I am, after all, attempting to render *my sense* of the humour in these objects. It also occurs to me that this problem is not limited to descriptions of humour; in what ways do we contaminate aesthetic objects with the aestheticism of our own language? Do beautiful objects need to be written about beautifully? Are scholars advised to resist or pursue the ekphrastic urge? Why do people always ask me if I plan to be funny when writing about humour?

[103] Bakhtin's notion of "festival laughter" in Medieval folk carnival has not to do with individual reactions to a humorous event (as in later, "rhetorical," conceptions of laughter), but is "universal in scope . . . it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity." This laughter attends the breakdown of divisions between high and low, particularly where the bodily strata are concerned. It is laughter that is at once degrading and regenerating, ever ambiguous. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11.

Bataille privileges laughter as a burst of unknowing that takes us beyond the limits of thought and subjectivity. See, for example, Georges Bataille, "Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears," in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). For more on Bataille, see Louis Kaplan, "Bataille's Laughter," in *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2010), 99–125.

Lastly, Cixous places laughter at the site of an ecstatic break with phallologocentrism and a flight into *écriture féminine*. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 875–93. Bataille and Cixous both figure prominently into Anca Parvulescu's broader project on thinking laughter's horizon beyond humour; see Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010).

[104] For an accessible account of historical attitudes to laughter, see Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). On ancient responses to the uncontainable force and "insubstantial materiality" of laughter, and how these attributes trouble even Freud's project on joking, see also Samuel Weber, "Laughing in the Meanwhile," *MLN* 102, no. 4 (September 1987): 691–706.

feel ourselves on the verge of such a burst, should not be cited as proof positive that an object is

without humour (I will address this again in Chapter 2). I also remain skeptical about whether

avant-garde humour always seeks the "assent" of our laughter. For one thing, this humour often

seems to sit together with terror, sadness, humourlessness – there may be deliberate attempts to

compound and confuse response. Additionally, we might encounter incongruous images in an

avant-garde film, but miss the "timing" we expect to make incongruity laughable. Here, for

example, is a very old text on comic timing by Jean Paul:

> Since we must ask why do we not attribute to every recognized error and lack of
> understanding that foil which gives it the brightness of comedy, the answer is that it is the
> mere omnipotence and speed of the physical perception that forces and pulls us into this
> false game.[105]

Avant-gardists do not typically abide by rules of temporality, even where humour is concerned.

If we miss the "hasty attribution" of comic incongruity in an avant-garde film, we may forget to

laugh, but I don't think this destroys the possibility of humour.

I should now like to pursue the problem of "assent" a little further, as a final means to

address the difficulties in analyzing avant-garde humour. To do so, I will draw upon a pair of

essays on comedy and humour written by avant-garde filmmakers.

TWO TEXTS ON COMEDY IN AVANT-GARDE FILM

The first is filmmaker Sidney Peterson's 1963 essay "A Note on Comedy in

Experimental Film," originally published in *Film Culture*.[106] Peterson observes that audience

laughter at experimental film screenings tends to be scarce, even though, from a certain vantage

point, the majority of experimental films are "comical." It is this vantage point that concerns

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[105] Jean Paul, "Jean Paul (J. P. F. Richter), from *Introduction to Aesthetics* (1804)," in *Theories of Comedy*, ed. Paul Lauter, trans. Lee Chadeayne (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964), 315–16.
[106] Sidney Peterson, "A Note on Comedy in Experimental Film," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, Praeger Film Books (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 398–403.

Peterson. The general public, writes Peterson, has a difficult time laughing at experimental film. Why? Perhaps for the reason that experimental film is viewed as a small, poor thing, and thus too vulnerable to withstand the kind of assaultive laughter one reserves for major Hollywood farces. Another possible reason is that experimental film is taken to be an "art," and many still assume it is unbecoming to laugh at art. Peterson therefore concludes that what experimental comedy requires is "Judases" of the cinema, whose howling, explosive laughter might, like a "*dynamiteur*," set off the sense of the comic in fellow spectators.

Just what do these Judases detect in laughing at experimental film comedy? Peterson cites a number of literary sources on comedy to clarify his understanding of the "farcical" side of experimental film. From Francisque Sarcey, Peterson takes the idea that comedy is often *endiablément* – "the devil is in it." We can conceive of this devil, after Jacob Boehme, as "rough and hard, also dark, hot, bitter, astringent, and cold."[107] Experimental comedy is like this devil; it "lacks heart," or the "sentimental organ" exploited by Hollywood, and therefore this diabolical comedy more readily disturbs the general public than makes them laugh. The Judas is one who can grasp in experimental comedy something close to "the 'ferocious fun' of the comic poetry of Scotland at the close of the Middle Ages," in which, Peterson quoting from C. S. Lewis tells us, "'the comic overlaps with the demoniac and the terrifying.'" Continuing with Lewis, this fun has little to do with "'human comedy; the joke lies in the extravagance . . . [and] the element of extravagance is supplied not so much by the events as by the preposterous connexions between them.'"[108] If one seeks cinematic precursors of this kind of extravagant comedy, Peterson argues the places to look are the "silent comedies, first French and then American, in which people used to experience, until their ribs ached, the ferocity and heartlessness of the farcical view of

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[107] Peterson, 399–400.
[108] Peterson, 400.

things."[109] Unfortunately the general public who once may have split their sides at silent comedy

fail to grasp similar comic ingredients in experimental film, because "[s]omething important has

been lost or set aside. Like the point, as it were, of a joke."[110] Peterson does not speculate on

what this lost thing is, but he implies that Judases know where to find it.

The second part of Peterson's essay proposes a different audience for experimental film

comedy, namely, filmmakers themselves. Here, Peterson suggests that much of what constitutes

experimental comedy is best captured in the production phases of a film, which are invisible to

the lay public.

> The most dismal production becomes an inspiring romp when viewed with the eyes and
> heard with the ears of those whose sensibilities are sharpened not so much by their
> awareness of what they have done, or by the intentions with which they have done it, as
> by their keen appreciation of what happens anyway in the film, especially in the earlier
> stages of a production: 'preposterous connexions' and the like. There is something about
> a rough cut that increases the *endiablément*, that makes it possible to howl with delight
> over things that would simply outrage a more disinterested spectator. And, by the time
> the rough cut has been refined, you have already been conditioned.[111]

Peterson refers to the knowledge of comedy in the stages of production as the "*activist*" view

shared by filmmakers, who recognize "there is an element of comedy in film itself, in the very

process of film-making." Experimental filmmakers – or rather, the cohort Peterson identifies

with – find irresistible the "comical-diabolical" side of making, and pursue recklessly the "comic

devices of inconsequence and illogic."[112] Peterson admits that this comical-diabolical side may

be tamed in the finished product, or else what remains of it does not always emerge in the

screening space, its presence or absence dependent on audiences and circumstances. This is the

"Heraclitan effect" of experimental film, where each viewing reveals something different than

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[109] Peterson, 400.
[110] Peterson, 400.
[111] Peterson, 401.
[112] Peterson, 402.

the last, to an audience different than the last, and experimental film comedy is finally at the mercy of this mutability.[113]

The second text on comedy I wish to cite here is Stan Brakhage's lecture on Charlie Chaplin, first delivered circa Fall 1971 at the School of Arts Institute of Chicago, and later published in Brakhage's collection *Film Biographies*. Brakhage's rather original topic is the fleeting "Art" of Chaplin's films, those glimpses of singular "dance" or "dream" (Brakhage associates these with Chaplin's lost child-self, whom Brakhage gives the name "Spencer") amidst Chaplin's standard audience-conditioning – and thus profit-minded – effects: his humour and sentimentality, his duties as a "social artist." Lest we think Brakhage is out to condemn comedy as incorrigibly manipulative, Brakhage breaks with his discussion of Chaplin to set down his beliefs on Comedy as an Art (upper-case intended). I quote the passage in full here, sounding its resonance with much of what follows in this dissertation.

> Please understand this delicate matter; it is not laughter per se I'm against; it IS the saying of "laughter," rather than what was meant, I hate; it is the joke as distraction I'm against. Natural jollity is body's happy tremble, the outbreak of it into sound throat's share of this with the airiness of The World and all around, an infectious wind of loving feeling. Therefore, I abhor all that which contrives this joy to mask its opposite, as surely as I abhor, for example—sex educational movies . . . etc.
>
> The contrivances of Art are, in my opinion, entirely designed to leave each attendant person *free*, unto himself (are thus called "keys," often enough, in formal search); there can be, therefore, no Art which seeks, for instance, to force a person to laugh; most that passes there-to-fore, as 'comedy' is, in fact, some opposite of that: most that easily passes as laughter is 'humor' in the sense one says "humour the mad."
>
> Comedy, if to be considered an art at all, must be for the sane—all laughter therefrom, occurring as naturally as it does in joy . . . i.e., that work has so presented an entire 'world' in such acceptance that one laughs in sheer pleasure of it and is tickled by the natural contradictions implicit in it *and* that acceptance of it. Comedy, as an Art, creates occasions for laughter; thus it is opposite to any humouring.[114]

Brakhage offers these thoughts as foundations to his critique of Chaplin the humourist, "the pusher" of the drug of laughter – of "trained response" – in return for adulation and profit.

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[113] Peterson, 402.

[114] Stan Brakhage, *Film Biographies* (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island, 1977), 117–18.

Nevertheless, Brakhage remains convinced that, in each of Chaplin's films, we are given to witness the Art of Comedy, in privileged scenes (Brakhage provides examples) where "an entire fragment of a World" is presented to us, transformed by "perfect timing" and "indi-visible" imagery, and inviting many joyful returns. These are not scenes that *depend* on laughter, still may they *occasion* laughter through their sheer "acceptance" of the World that they contrive.

These essays by Peterson and Brakhage are in many ways obscure and highly personal, yet I think they offer entry points into a general discussion of humour in avant-garde film. Both essays oppose the idea of comedy that conditions laughter response. According to Peterson, laughter in experimental comedy can be hard to come by for an audience expecting "sentimental," or "human" comedy, with comfortably identifiable comic situations. Only the Judases of the screening room will have the attitude to appreciate the "comical-diabolical" side of experimental film, in which "preposterous connexions" are extravagantly and heartlessly pursued for their own sake. To detect this element of diabolical comedy would be to recover something comic from the "very process of film-making," something strongly sensed by filmmakers at the rough-cut stage, when "preposterous connexions" seem to arise spontaneously from the material, like temptations.

Brakhage has little to say for this diabolical side of filmmaking, with its "comic devices of inconsequence and illogic" (Peterson's Surrealist sympathies show through here), but he does place a similar value on spontaneous apprehension. For Brakhage, laughter in Comedy is not something conditioned by situations but made possible in "occasions." Brakhage means that Comedy as Art does not induce a spectator to laugh – does not "humour" them, as Brakhage punningly puts it – but sets the stages for the spectator to respond freely, with laughter "occurring as naturally as it does in joy." This involves the artist's presentation of an "entire

'world'" within a frame of "such acceptance," contradictions and all, that the spectator is inspired into similar acceptance, as if by an infectious air, upon which laughter is felt to arise naturally. Notwithstanding the differences in their senses of the comic, Brakhage and Peterson seem to agree on the importance of a wide (we might say worldly) frame of acceptance – for Peterson it is the acceptance of the comical-diabolical view of things – to an unconditioned form of audience laughter.

Brakhage and Peterson's remarks offer suggestions for why many avant-garde filmmakers recoil from the idea that they have intentionally *used* humour in their work. George Landow, a name synonymous with avant-garde film comedy if ever there was one, has often downplayed the presence of humour in his films. When it was once suggested to him that humour made his films "accessible," Landow replied,

> Like a life preserver? . . . I suppose that's a good thing, but it's of secondary importance because humour is extremely subjective. Some people have found humour in the parables of Christ, but did the disciples laugh? We'll never know. If a joke came about in the process of making the film, I wouldn't edit it out . . . just as some have come about in the process of doing this interview. I left them in. But I wouldn't insert a joke just for its own sake.[115]

Here again, as in the two essays above, we find an honouring of free process, with its allowance for the organic discovery or occasioning of humour, but not its conditioned use. Similar observations have been made by animator Larry Jordan: "what I have to watch out against is self-conscious stories and self-conscious humor. I'm always delighted if something funny

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[115] Owen Land, *Two Films by Owen Land*, ed. Mark Webber (London: LUX, 2005), 107. Talking about his film *On The Marriage Broker Joke as Cited by Sigmund Freud in Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, Or Can the Avant-Garde Artist be Wholed?* (1979), Landow remarks, "I was also interested in Zen koans, a kind of riddle used to bring about satori. In a way, koans are similar to jokes, especially the kind of jokes known as shaggy dog stories, pointless jokes. I thought, 'Marriage broker jokes, Zen koans, shaggy dog stories … There's got to be a film there!' Once I had those elements the film almost made itself. Sometimes I look at it and think, 'Who made this film?' It doesn't look like something I would have done. Something took over and made the film. I think it's good when that happens because you know you're onto the right thing. When you have to force the material then I think you should stop" (108).

happens in one of the animation films . . . But if I try to make it funny, it's dreadful."[116] Humour is truly creative when it happens in the course of making an avant-garde film, a happy result of the material's autonomous communication with the artist (surely it helps if the artist has a sense of humour, that is, can recognize it when they see it). If an artist as patently funny as Michael Snow occasionally demurs from the question of humour in his films, it is more than likely because humour carries an implication of the overly intentional, and attaches to an expected audience response. The idea of wanting to make the audience laugh, wanting to force response in any way, violates the ideals of a free cinema. Freedom of process seems, in this way, one of the last principles which artists are unwilling to violate with humour.

Again, this is all to suggest that avant-garde humour is an elusive object.[117] Even when we are sure we have found it, it seems to warn us not to overstate its case, not to expect the grand prize of laughter. Its presence is at times so low-frequency as to seem but faint teasing; at others so high-pitched that we could be convinced it's just annoying. By chasing this humour, I do not wish to pin it down with a clear, rational identification. At times I get the idea that this humour is in the process of understanding itself, and thus asks to be understood as not really complete. Still I proceed.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Each of my chapters analyzes avant-garde film and video humour alongside what I see as related developments in the wider field of art humour. This is meant to show that similar

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[116] Quoted in R. Bruce Elder, *Dada, Surrealism, and the Cinematic Effect* (Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 499.

[117] For an example of the trickiness of reading comedy into avant-garde film, see Brakhage's analysis of James Broughton's film *Nuptiae* (1969). Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End*, 81–87. Brakhage is quite convinced this film of Broughton's wedding ceremony is a comedy, hysterically funny, but he argues that one has to watch and listen closely to understand it as such. Broughton himself, says Brakhage, does not see it as a comedy. Brakhage offers that *Nuptiae* is "a very tragic-comic film. The minute you can begin to laugh at it, the next evolution is to realize what an incredibly sad film it also is" (84).

questions about art and society are being treated humorously in these times; the differences in the functions and goals of humorous practice are revealing of a range strategies for resistance and boundary-crossing. The reader will note that each chapter catches a formation of avant-garde practice near the beginnings of its coming into being, or in the process of accelerated self-definition; a proposal underlying my arguments is that the relative newness of these formations partially accounts for their experiments with play and humour. To invite a surprise guest into this discussion, we can quote Bertrand Russell on the importance of play in the fostering of new disciplines: "A certain freedom from the strictures of sustained formality tends to promote the development of a subject in its early stages, even if this means the risk of a certain amount of error."[118] We can ignore, at our leisure, Russell's follow-up point on the need for tightening standards at some later stage of development.

I begin this dissertation with a chapter on what is routinely thought to be the least humorous "movement" in the history of avant-garde cinema: structural film. From the time structural film was christened by critic P. Adams Sitney in the late 60s, and on through its decade of arguable entrenchment in the 1970s, detractors of this movement emphasized its "academic," "tautologous," and restrictively "modernist" (read: Clement-Greenbergian) features, all viewed as betrayals of the spontaneity and humour that lent the underground cinema its special air of open possibility. Joining recent scholarship that has re-contextualized structural film in order to unsettle its reputation as a closed-off, medium-specific turn in practice, I argue for certain filmmakers' interest in structure not as a dogmatic working principle but as an idea, proposal, or even ruse, one whose limits could be playfully teased, pushed, and exceeded. The central case study of Chapter 1 is the film work of Michael Snow, whose often vulgar sense of humour acts

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[118] Bertrand Russell, *Wisdom of the West*, ed. Paul Foulkes (New York: Crescent Books, 1977), 280.

as an eruptive force that ironizes and opens a space for play in his more structural procedures, the latter being what Snow calls the "containers" of his films.

Chapter 2 moves into the world of early video art, with a focus on the humour of feminist performance videos. Again, I contest the accusation of humourlessness aimed at artists, only now this charge originates in a deeper cultural stereotype, that of the humourless feminist. Instead of overzealously defending feminism from this charge, I attempt to understand the strategic importance of humourlessness, even as it operates in humorous feminist projects. A central concern of this chapter is the notion of "articulation," understood in relation to humour to hold two seemingly contrary meanings: a precise, coherent position, and a point of flexibility. I bring these notions into conversation with the work of two early practitioners of feminist video, Susan Mogul and Martha Rosler. The satirical and parodic performances of these artists will be analyzed for the simultaneous work they perform, namely, their staging of clear opposition to stereotypes, and their concurrent flexibility of address – or rather, their comic mode of "delivery," thought in terms of technology and performance. This notion of delivery implicates such factors as performed nonchalance and lack of preciousness with respect to the low-grade quality of the Portapak equipment used by the artists. I argue for the importance of a sense of humour *about* delivery to the shifting political horizons of feminism. How might an artist's shrug signal openness to future feminist articulations?

In Chapter 3, I examine avant-garde humour that derives from pop culture appropriations. Amidst polemical discourses on the divide between the "cause" of avant-garde art and the prepackaged "effect" of popular, consumer culture – or kitsch, in Clement Greenberg's famous usage – how do artists confirm or confuse this divide with humour? My particular interest is appropriation humour that results not from satirical distance but strange closeness with popular

culture. Here, I circle back to the 1960s, examining humour in two coincident moments in the New York arts scene of the 1960s: Pop art and underground cinema. While artists in both of these (sometimes interacting) constituencies collude with pop culture humorously and without obvious critical intent, there are key differences in their humour. For the artists in question in my chapter, I argue these differences are contextual and best observed in degrees of attachment – or *belief* – between artist and appropriated matter. Where underground filmmakers like Jack Smith and the Kuchar brothers are concerned, the humour of cultish devotion to Hollywood's artificial "effects," often conceived too readily as a camp irony, can be framed as a form of attachment whose very excess is emblematic, indeed constitutive, of the underground's self-definition as a liberated counter-cinema.

I close Chapter 3 by analyzing the video work of two recent pop culture appropriators, Michael Robinson and Shambhavi Kaul. Here I follow Erika Balsom's insight that post-1990s found footage practices encounter pop culture with a mixture of critique and enjoyment, turning from the demystificatory practices that arguably defined the 1970s and 80s. I suggest that this move also calls back to underground appropriation practices, minus the all-consuming cultishness, in that the libidinal investments we make in popular culture once more become the grounds for a humorously excessive restaging of popular effects. What contextual differences are of note here? In an age of fan-vid tributes to nostalgic pop culture objects, I argue Robinson and Kaul's videos humorously *remystify* their borrowed materials, replenishing and making strange their spectacular hold on us through the devices of the avant-garde. In the process, I suggest, Robinson and Kaul prompt reflection on the ways in which the avant-garde can be conceived as its own kind of amusing "special effect."

In the last analysis, this dissertation is driven by a few basic questions. What functions does humour play – to what aspirations or needs does it tend – in the historical practices and discourses of avant-garde film and video? What can we make of the proliferation of humour at pivotal moments of self-definition or re-definition in these arts – for instance, in the midst of heightened discourse over oppositional social praxis, and identification with or distinctness from other art movements? How does humour challenge or contribute to resident understandings of the avant-garde, and vice versa?

CHAPTER 1

HUMOUR IN STRUCTURAL FILM:

THE CRUDE AND COPIOUS CASE OF MICHAEL SNOW

Al Rutcurts' 1970 film *Regrettable Redding Condescension* begins with a black screen, over which a distinctly Canadian-sounding voice tells the viewer,

> Since 1966, I have been filming the process of pouring red paint on a wide variety of objects. A few weeks ago I felt an urge to film another object being covered with red paint. What I believe I see recorded in that piece of film fills me with such fear, such utter dread and loathing, that I think I shall never dare to make another film again. Here it is. Look at it. Do you see what I see?

Following this narration is a close-up of a hotplate; as predicted a bucket of red paint is poured on it; slowly, in silence, the paint begins to bubble and smoke over the hot coils; after some time the picture ends. The film we have just watched is indeed regrettable, involves redding of a sort, and most certainly condescends to the viewer. There is nothing much to *see* here, unless your idea of excitement is watching paint fry.

This is, of course, a parody film: an intramural parody of avant-garde film included as one of several comic segments in George Landow – a.k.a. Owen Land's – *Wide Angle Saxon* (1975). The title *Regrettable Redding Condescension* riffs on Landow's own *Remedial Reading Comprehension* (1970), but the main target of the parody is *(nostalgia)* (1971) by Hollis Frampton, Landow's fellow practitioner of so-called "structural" cinema (Al Rutcurts is a not-so-subtle anagram for structural). Frampton's *(nostalgia)* works with the up-close hotplate as well, only what slowly incinerates on its coils is a series of Frampton's artist photographs, each of which is provided – in staggered sequence, that is, one photograph too early – a verbal description and autobiographical context spoken by an offscreen narrator. The speaker is not Frampton but yet another "structural" filmmaker, Michael Snow, whose "flat Ontario Scottish

delivery"[119] can also be heard affecting a bit of light self-parody in Landow's film. *(nostalgia)* is a film *about* memory presented in an anticipatory structure which self-reflexively engages the viewer in active processes of memory and foresight. Landow's parody seizes practically word for word on a particular segment in *(nostalgia)*, its last, where Frampton/Snow describe a photograph whose one peculiar detail so fills the author with "fear," "utter dread and loathing," that he is ready to quit photography for good. *Here it is. Look at it. Do you see what I see?* Cut to black. This cliffhanger, at once haunting and teasing, is sent up in Rutcurts' banal anti-climax. Anticipatory cinema doesn't always have its rewards. Not that this matters to one Earl Greaves, the lead character in Landow's *Wide Angle Saxon*, who in the course of politely clapping after a screening of *Regrettable Redding Condescension* at the Walker Art Center, by some miracle or accident suddenly recalls a sermon by Christ from the Gospel of Matthew and undergoes an on-the-spot religious conversion.

What had happened to avant-garde film by the mid-70s that it invited such parody? It is true, one could simply explain *Regrettable Reading Condescension* as a parody among many in the repertoire of Landow, who would decades later, with his work-in-progress *Undesirables* (1999), continue to lampoon the experimental film community.[120] And perhaps by 1975 it had

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[119] Hollis Frampton quoted in Michael Snow, *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, ed. Louise Dompierre (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 243. Frampton didn't use his own voice for *(nostalgia)* because he felt his "tendency is to imitate Richard Burton in the bathtub" (243). Snow is confirmed as the voice of *Regrettable Redding Condescension* in Owen Land, *Two Films by Owen Land*, ed. Mark Webber (London: LUX, 2005), 27. Incidentally, when asked in a conversation circa 2012 about providing the voiceover for Landow's film, Snow claimed not to have remembered doing so. Thanx to Clint Enns for this anecdote.

[120] Landow's explanation for this project is worth quoting in full: "The idea started with a casual comment made by Stan Brakhage, must have been way back in the early 1970s. It stuck in my mind. Now that I think about it, Brakhage may have meant this as a joke. He said, 'Someday Hollywood will probably make a film about us,' – 'us' meaning the experimental filmmakers – 'and I wonder which actors will play us?' Think about that first of all: the idea that Hollywood would make a film about experimental filmmakers is totally ridiculous. The fact that one would think about which actor was going to play me at some time in the future, I think that's very funny. Eventually it germinated in my mind and I thought it was an interesting idea … A film about experimental filmmakers, especially in the very formative period, approximately 1968 to 1972. The movement went from a high point where there was a lot of publicity generated in the media, and seemed to peter out shortly after that. At a certain time, I guess it was in the 1980s, there was some discussion in film circles about the decline of the experimental film and people were

long been the case, going back to the days of the underground, that experimental film opened itself to parody through the repetitious use of a grab bag of aesthetic tricks. Such a point was made by filmmaker Shirley Clarke in 1967, when she observed that the forms of underground film had been established to such an extent "that they could really be pulled out of context and done and you really wouldn't know whether it wasn't a joke because of certain things, such as stock framing or single-frame exposure or triple exposures or rock-and-roll music."[121] Yet Landow's parody is more pointed than that. *Regrettable Redding Condescension* targets a particular film, or rather, less personally, a particular "movement" in experimental cinema – what critic P. Adams Sitney notoriously classified as "structural film."[122] The appearance of this film parody in the work of Landow, whose career-long propensity was to probe institutions – artistic, religious, educational – with a dose of mockery, gestures to the idea that structural film had itself become a perceivable institution, and furthermore (the religious theme in *Wide Angle Saxon* runs strong[123]), an orthodoxy.

The main objectives of this chapter are to understand how the "structural film" phenomenon that swept the 1970s could be both vulnerable to humorous attack, and in practice, also humorous in its own right. That Landow himself, without asking for it, was credited as one

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theorising about why it happened and some people suggested maybe because of video, and I guess there were other theories too. So I thought, 'Why not come up with a fantastic theory about why that happened?' – a fictional theory – and put that into a film?" Land, *Two Films by Owen Land*, 122. Landow's *Undesirables* parodies Frampton's film *Critical Mass* (1971), among others.

[121] Shirley Clarke and Storm De Hirsch, "A Conversation -- Shirley Clarke and Storm De Hirsch," *Film Culture* 46 (October 1967): 53.

[122] Landow has provided different reasons for why he chose *(nostalgia)* as his target. For example, "People have associated me with Hollis Frampton as if we were some sort of a team, which is kind of ridiculous. Our work is very different. So that is why I confused my film with his film ... the way some critics see our films as being both the same." Quoted in P. Gregory Springer, "New Improved George Landow Interview," *Film Culture* 67-68-69 (1979): 89. Later Landow explained, "It has to do with my disappointment with conceptual art, and with the conceptual tendency. I thought that [*(nostalgia)*] was hindered by its over-conceptualisation. And it was an example of the kind of films that would be shown at the Walker Art Center." Land, *Two Films by Owen Land*, 105.

[123] Landow was in fact a self-proclaimed Christian, though needless to say an unorthodox one. The religious themes in *Wide Angle Saxon* are not, then, simply satirical. See his remarks in Springer, "New Improved George Landow Interview."

of the innovators of structural film implies that this "genre" was never lacking for humourists. In fact, when we take account of the films and filmmakers who have been grouped under the "structural" heading we see ample evidence of humour, the valences of which both suggest a connection to the previous underground cinema's playful sense of humour, and mark a turn in how experimental films framed their subjects humorously, and to what ends.

This chapter unfolds in two parts. First, I revisit the controversy and fallout of P. Adams Sitney's article on the North American "structural film," to examine the grounds on which this supposed movement came to be the object of much ridicule, particularly from within the experimental film scene. It will be argued that a host of discursive and institutional confusions around "structural film" – identifications drawn liberally between the filmmakers and tendencies initially examined by Sitney; the British "Structural/materialists" who co-opted some of these filmmakers for their own, more prescriptive projects; and the up-and-coming filmmakers in the 70s who patterned themselves after both – resulted in a notion of the structural ethic as skewed towards medium purism – which would then be seen by critics as reductive, didactic, and dead-ended – at the expense of other considerations.

In the second part of this chapter, I examine the underappreciated humour of the (North) American structural filmmakers who, unwittingly, fell under Sitney's rubric (saying nothing for the filmmakers who followed in their wake). If the blame for structural film's reputation for reductivism can ultimately be traced to Sitney's rash decision to fix the "genre" of structural film, thereby betraying the "free cinema" ideal of the underground, I note that Sitney's original evaluative terms do not totally obstruct what seems humorous about films that collect under the structural heading. In fact, Sitney's terms can be useful in understanding how humour functions in these films – for instance, in seeing how predetermined shapes, structures, or systems establish

an "axis of expectation" that primes our grasp of the humorous, hinting at predictability only to evade it.[124]

While I use Sitney's terms, and go on referring to existent films as "structural," I don't mean to engage in further refinements of this "genre" of avant-garde cinema, but instead to re-conceptualize how "structure" appears and functions in my film examples. It seems wise to follow Jonathan Walley in thinking of structural film not as a generic category into which we can nominate this or that film, but as a "discursive map of historical and theoretical territory," a way of taking a trace of "the collective (not at all to say unified) mind of experimental cinema."[125] Taking up from Walley's re-thinking of the structural film phenomenon (addressed in the following paragraph), I would propose that the *idea of structure*, which manifests in questions of medium but also larger issues of social structuring, is often what is being held up for humorous testing or experimentation in the structural films I have in mind. My study will come to focus on the films of Michael Snow, whose inclination is after all towards predetermined shape, or what Snow refers to as a "container," but only as one part of a legibly comic proposition that figures to test the limits of this container through such means as puns, diversionary play, and, in increasing measure, copious content. Contextualizing these impulses in Snow, artistically and in broader cultural terms, will lead me to some possible sources and implications of this humour.

This chapter joins a recent move in scholarship to re-examine the scope and achievement of what we, by custom or conviction, call structural film. Jonathan Walley has done much to trouble the notion that the signal achievement of structural filmmakers, as commonly recognized,

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[124] A question that goes largely unexplored in this chapter is whether Sitney's terms, once etched in discourse, have the effect of *increasing* humorous play in structural-type films, though there seems reason (beyond *Wide Angle Saxon*) to think they do. Instead of speculating on this matter, however, I am content to trace how so-called structural filmmakers pursue the logics of their early work down more blatantly humorous paths.

[125] Jonathan Walley, "Five Appendices in Search of a Text: A Disproportionate Response (Piece) to Peter Gidal and Mark Webber, Eds., *Peter Gidal / Flare Out: Aesthetics 1966-2016*, with Excurses on 'Structural Film',” *World Picture* 12 (Winter 2017).

was to establish the film equivalent of a Clement-Greenbergian medium purism, restrictive in its use of materials. For Walley, this ignores the "paracinematic" pursuits of many included on the roster of structural filmmakers, such as Tony Conrad and Paul Sharits, to explore the outer, dematerialized limits of the "idea of cinema."[126] Similarly, Tess Takahashi has shown that structural film's period of entrenchment, often seen as a decade or more dominated by filmic medium specificity and its narrowing or "institutionalizing" effects, saw an uptick of filmmakers with interests that crossed mediums – again by those thought of as paradigmatic structural filmmakers, such as Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland – as well as a turn to "medium" as an unstable ground upon which to metaphorically stage wider cultural and political uncertainties, for instance, surrounding the status of language and subjectivity.[127] Finally, Juan A. Suárez has proposed that structural film ought to be considered "materialist" not merely for its attention to the film medium's specific material traits, but also in terms of how structural filmmakers, in the midst of their controlled procedures, come to inhabit material "difference": "the uncontrollability of matter, the unpredictability of the machine, the enigmatic pulses of everyday life."[128] Given these insights, one can no longer claim that structural filmmakers, in essence, sealed themselves off from the outside world, in a consummately hermeticist gesture. Nor, I believe, can one allow the reputation that followed structural film – that it was, for example, an "academic" way of making experimental cinema, of providing "tautological" demonstrations about film, and therefore dull – overshadow the fact that many structural films are playfully open-ended (even as

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[126] Jonathan Walley, "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film," *October* 103 (Winter 2003): 15–30; Jonathan Walley, "Identity Crisis: Experimental Film and Artistic Expansion," *October* 137 (Summer 2011): 23–50.

[127] See Chapter 1, "'Promiscuous Mixture': Structural Film and Video Art (1960s-1970s)" in Tess Leina Takahashi, "Impure Film: Medium Specificity and the North American Avant-Garde (1965-2005)" (Dissertation, Brown University, 2007), 9–50.

[128] Juan A. Suárez, "Structural Film: Noise," in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Redrobe Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 85. Another revisionary look at structural film is Juan Carlos Kase, "Reassessing the Personal Registers and Anti-Illusionist Imperatives of the New Formal Film of the 1960s and '70s," *October* 163 (Winter 2017): 49–70.

they appear static and enclosed), and what's more, are prone to ironize any attempt to rigorously define the parameters of their medium.

HOW P. ADAMS SITNEY KILLED THE AVANT-GARDE

"Suddenly a cinema of structure has emerged." With these seven words, announced in the first line of the first page of the coverless Summer 1969 issue of *Film Culture*, P. Adams Sitney sent seismic ripples through the experimental film world, impacting how this mode of film would thereafter be practiced and written about. Or, as one of his subsequent detractors would have it, Sitney's proclamation "triggered an aesthetic that for a decade would serve as a back brace for the spineless."[129]

What Sitney rather naively titled "structural film" was an apparent shift among a group of emergent New York-based filmmakers[130] away from the "formal" model of prevailing experimentalists like Stan Brakhage and Gregory Markopoulos, who privileged complex, conjunctive forms arrived at in the editing stage, and towards a cinema in which the "shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified," serving as "the primal impression of the film."[131] Content in structural films tends to be minimal, Sitney observes, and the films can be considered "static" because they do not modulate or evolve internally, existing rather like film "objects" remarkable above all for their shape.[132] Without delay, Sitney began to assign key – though non-definitive – techniques to structural film: a fixed camera, film flicker, and loop printing (and in a revised version of the essay, rephotography), the mechanical likes of which

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[129] Gary Doberman, "New York Cut the Crap," in *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 355.
[130] Sitney's original roster of structural filmmakers: Tony Conrad, George Landow, Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Ernie Gehr, and Paul Sharits. The other major name now synonymous with structural film, Hollis Frampton, is mentioned in brief at the end of Sitney's essay, and would be brought to the fore in the essay's revised editions.
[131] P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," *Film Culture* 47 (Summer 1969): 1.
[132] Sitney, 9.

betrayed their distance from the human-centred processes of the formal generation. Noting the "unexpectedness" of this development, Sitney nevertheless sought to connect it to what had come before in experimental cinema (primarily the films of Andy Warhol, which Sitney took for a dialectical challenge to the formal tendency[133]), a goal that would eventually culminate in structural film's placement in a continuous tradition of what Sitney called, in his first book-length study of American avant-garde cinema, *Visionary Film*.

In the years that followed, Sitney's essay had a number of unforeseeable and divisive consequences. Among those initially singled out as "structural" practitioners, reactions to Sitney's nomenclature were generally bemused.[134] The label was, however, enthusiastically taken up in publicity for the avant-garde film, which began to find itself conditionally embraced by the art world. By 1971, an issue of *Artforum*, edited by frequent *Film Culture* contributor Annette Michelson, spotlights many films and filmmakers of the now-accepted "structural" cast. The term comes to be repeated unreservedly in exhibitions of experimental work.[135] Perhaps

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[133] For example, Sitney would come to call Warhol's film *Sleep* (1963), six hours of a man sleeping, "a monumental subversion of the dream tradition of the avant-garde film," a tradition which Sitney's own project expounds. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 349.

[134] Below is a sampling of filmmaker reactions to the term *structural*.

George Landow: "I wish that word hadn't been applied to films; it only confuses issues. I don't know anything about structuralism in linguistics. If a category must be created, formalism might be a better word to use. You can do more with it. For instance, the other night we invited Malcolm Le Grice over. Since he is a self-proclaimed formal film-maker, it was amusing to speculate whether he would arrive wearing a tuxedo or whether he would arrive wearing tails." Springer, "New Improved George Landow Interview," 91–92.

Hollis Frampton: "That incorrigible tendency to label, to make movements, always has the same effect, and that effect is to render the work invisible. It effectively gets rid of it." "Hollis Frampton in San Francisco," *Cinemanews* 77, no. 6 (December 1977): 8.

Paul Sharits responded to Sitney's article by mailing the critic a mock-scientific booklet of medical, mathematical, and cinematic terms juxtaposed with images of hardcore pornography ("here's a present for *P. Adams*—he's the sort of fellow who can best appreciate a truly scientific/rational approach to the female body"). Sharits also promised to teach a course with the goal of dismantling Sitney's notion of structural film. See Branden W. Joseph, "A Crystal Web Image of Horror: Paul Sharits' Early Structural and Substructural Cinema," in *Paul Sharits: A Retrospective*, ed. Susanne Pfeffer (Kassel, Germany: Fridericanum, 2015), 204, 205. Joseph's essay is invaluable for thinking of Sharits in relation to some of the concerns of the present chapter, such as the notion of "overflows" in structural film, and indeed of sexism.

[135] See, for example, Dennis Wheeler, ed., *Form and Structure in Recent Film at the Vancouver Art Gallery from October 29 to November 5 1972* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1972).

most significantly, Sitney's critical project is soon appropriated and dramatically rerouted by

British "Structural/materialism," chiefly promoted by Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice, who

advance an interpretation of structural work that is both severely medium-specific and self-

avowedly political.[136] Structural/materialism may be partially to blame for the popular

conception of structural film as a "purist" endeavor (though the apolitical connotation would

chafe Gidal), that is, concerned to expose the material basis of film and thus reprove illusionism,

ideas Sitney's project does not overly emphasize. Bart Testa has argued that it is the

Structural/materialist model which theorist Peter Wollen draws upon in his famous critique of

the "essentialism" of both the British and American avant-garde cinemas; however, it should be

said that Wollen also quotes-to-incriminate the writings of North American critics such as

Michelson and Regina Cornwell, who explicate structural film as a pursuit of materiality in the

modernist, Greenbergian sense.[137] Meanwhile, amidst this discursive confusion arrives a new

breed of young filmmakers in the 1970s, whom Tony Conrad (one of Sitney's reluctant

forefathers) could characterize as adopters of a "fashionable doxology," practicing

"structuralism" self-consciously and in obvious piety to a retrograde Greenbergism.[138]

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[136] Peter Gidal, ed., *Structural Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1978).

[137] Bart Testa, "An Axiomatic Cinema: Michael Snow's Films," in *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow, 1956-1991*, ed. Jim Shedden (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1995), 46; Peter Wollen, "'Ontology' and 'Materialism' in Film," in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso; NLB, 1982), 193–94.

Michele Pierson argues that Sitney and Michelson's negotiations of film "modernism," including their views on structural film, are "caricatured" when critics hastily align them with Greenberg. See Michele Pierson, "The Accessibility of the Avant-Garde: Talk about American Experimental Cinema," *Discourse* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 12–15. For an example of what Pierson is contesting, see J. Hoberman's statement, confusing on many levels, that structural film's "'new' modernism was anti-illusionist and reflexive, essentialist and didactic, an investigation of cinema's own unique and irreducible properties and operations. It was the modernism of Clement Greenberg, transplanted from the art world (courtesy of Andy Warhol)." J. Hoberman, "After Avant-Garde Film," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York; Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art; D.R. Godine, 1984), 64–65. For a critical study of the rhetorics used to legitimate structural film as a medium-specific turn – as deployed by, for example, Rosalind Krauss – see Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 233–38.

[138] Tony Conrad, "Is This Penny Ante or a High Stakes Game? An Interventionist Approach to Experimental Filmmaking," *Millennium Film Journal* 43/44 (Summer 2005): 103.

So far, we have not accounted for the backlash to Sitney's essay itself, which was considerable. Unwittingly or not, by joining the frenzy to name and inventory movements that was consuming the art world of the 1960s, Sitney courted the latter's atmosphere of dispute and reprisal.[139] Fluxus figurehead George Maciunas was the first out of the gate with a takedown of Sitney, organizing his typically schematic critique around three defects in Sitney's article: terminology (as in, Sitney doesn't know what a "structure" is, and anyway really means "monomorphism"), chronology (as in, Sitney willfully ignores developments in minimalism but mainly Fluxus, the true precursor to structural film), and origins (as in, Sitney shows no awareness of the foundational monomorphic events in art).[140] Following Maciunas, several critics pointed to the vagueness and contradictions at the heart of Sitney's essay, a common refrain being the lack of consistency in how Sitney delimited structural film proper from the "formal" work it purportedly supplanted.[141] In the meantime, Sitney's essay proceeded to pass through, by some counts, four different revisions by the late 70s, including a privileged chapter in Sitney's ambitious history of the American avant-garde, *Visionary Film*, first published in 1972. The last of these revisions was a December 1977 debate at Millennium Film Workshop between Sitney and Malcolm Le Grice, in which Sitney decried the gradual acceptance of "structural film" as "a slogan more than a tentative critical-historical term," and admitted how severely he had underestimated the loadedness of the term "structural," innocent as he was in 1969 to the "cesspool of French thought" that had gathered in American universities while Sitney

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[139] For more on this contentious time see James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[140] George Maciunas, "On 'Structural Film' (by P. Adams Sitney)," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, Praeger Film Books (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 349. Sitney answers Maciunas' charges in the first revision of his essay, P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, Praeger Film Books (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 326–48.

[141] For precisely this critique, see Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1977), 86. For a roundup of the inconsistencies between Sitney's various versions of the essay, see Regina Cornwell, "Structural Film: Ten Years Later," *The Drama Review* 23, no. 3 (September 1979): 77–92.

was abroad.[142] Despite these remarks,[143] Sitney continued to update the structural film essay in subsequent editions of *Visionary Film* up to the early 2000s, without significantly revising his terms, opting instead to cite his many critics and to add and subtract names and titles from the structural Rolodex. It is difficult, then, to dismiss Bruce Jenkins' argument – echoing points made against Sitney's larger critical project by Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom[144] – that what Sitney effects in the course of revising his essay is a reification of terms once purportedly "tentative," transforming the matter of "structural film" from a "critical enterprise" into a bona fide "theory," now comfortably slotted into Sitney's canonizing (and canonized) *Visionary Film* as an endemic part of the history of avant-garde cinema.[145]

The exceptions taken to Sitney's essay are, however, only one aspect of the critical retaliation against the phenomenon of structural film. Polemics were also aimed at the influx of films and filmmakers that Sitney's essay arguably helped to catalyze through the 1970s and into the 80s,[146] even as Sitney himself had no hand in validating the artists who would come to self-label as "structuralists." Fred Camper's "The End of Avant-Garde Film," published in the mid-

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[142] Malcolm Le Grice and P. Adams Sitney, "Narrative Illusion vs. Structural Realism," *Millennium Film Journal* 16–18 (Fall 1986/Winter 1987): 313, 314.

[143] Sitney later claimed he was drunk during this debate; reading over the transcript, one is inclined to believe him. See "P. Adams Sitney with Brian L. Frye," The Brooklyn Rail, https://brooklynrail.org/2005/11/film/p-adams-sitney-with-brian-l-frye.

[144] Penley and Bergstrom attacked Sitney's attempt to "reconstruct" and thereby ratify avant-garde forms instead of dealing with them in a usefully theoretical or analytical manner, for instance from a reception perspective. Though Penley and Bergstrom upbraid Sitney for merely endorsing the achievements of the avant-garde – "nothing new" comes of the criticism practiced by Sitney – theirs was less a complaint against works included by Sitney in his canon than an argument that his hermeneutics were out of touch with the true radical potential of avant-garde cinema – namely its ability to interface with theories and political action properly "resistant" to the threat of the Hollywood other and cultural/ideological conformism. In other words, Sitney's wasn't the critical history the avant-garde needed to take stock of its radical past and propel the necessary "shift of attention to the entire process of signification" in avant-garde filmmaking and criticism. Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom, "The Avant-Garde: Histories and Theories," *Screen* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1978): 113–27. For Sitney's sardonic reply, see P. Adams Sitney, Constance Penley, and Janet Bergstrom, "Letters from the Film Work Group, P. Adams Sitney, Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom," *Screen* 20, no. 3/4 (1979): 149–59.

[145] Bruce Jenkins, "A Case Against 'Structural Film,'" *Journal of the University Film Association* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 9–14.

[146] For an account of structural film's influence on the early-80s Canadian film scene, see Mike Hoolboom, *Underground: The Untold Story of the Funnel Film Collective* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 2017), 110–13.

80s, is the pivotal diatribe against this period of activity, going so far as to name names in its broadside attack on the "academical structural films that sprouted up like weeds in the years following Sitney's article."[147] For Camper, these films epitomized the "institutional period" of avant-garde, whose beginnings Camper dates to 1966, or, roughly when the underground dissolved and many avant-gardists migrated to the film schools. The avant-garde hereafter becomes academicized in a double fashion: established filmmakers take up academic positions, but worse, the next wave of filmmakers graduate from the schools practicing "academic" filmmaking – that is, work for which the simple-minded repetition of techniques of avant-gardism past, bereft of the passion and complexity once found in the "masterpieces" of the movement, represents nothing but the artist's bid to be acknowledged as a savvy player in the field.[148] Thus, structural film, a now-recognized genre, comes to be practiced by rote, after the fashion not of Sitney's original group of North American pioneers, but of Peter Gidal's British Structural/materialists, whose reductive, prescriptive investigations of the "medium's mechanism" proceed, for Camper, "in a simple, logical, unparadoxical manner that can only be called academic."[149]

The anti-academic slant of Camper's lengthy screed, as well as its palpable sense of betrayal, can be found in concentrated form in Nick Zedd's "Cinema of Transgression Manifesto" (1985). With guns blazing on behalf of the super 8 "punk" film movement based in

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[147] Fred Camper, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," *Millennium Film Journal* 16–18 (Fall /Winter 1987 1986): 113.
[148] It is not clear if Camper means to blame filmmaker-professors for the lacklustre work of their students. For a thorough critique of Camper and others' accusations regarding the ill effects the academy – and its supposed crutch, structural film – had on the avant-garde, see Michael Zryd, "The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 17–42.
[149] Camper, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," 112–13. Paul Arthur, less venomously, shares Camper's opinion on post-Sitney structural film: "Where the justly celebrated canon of *Wavelength*, *Zorns Lemma*, *Serene Velocity*, *Institutional Quality*, et al., held in suspension the opposing dynamics of subjectivity and objectivity, material process and meaning, the expressive and the anti-expressive, much of recent practice has chosen to follow a unilateral path through these terms." Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 71.

New York in the 1980s, Zedd writes, "We openly renounce and reject the entrenched academic snobbery which erected a monument to laziness known as structuralism and proceeded to lock out those filmmakers who possessed the vision to see through this charade." Like Camper, Zedd classifies academic work as an "easy approach to cinematic creativity," one that "ruined the underground of the sixties when the scourge of the film school took over." It is therefore necessary, Zedd concludes, to blow up all the film schools and replace the dull academics with filmmakers who have a notion of what's always mattered most in the underground film – a "sense of humour" and a capacity to "shock" an audience, twin elements of surprise foreign to the inherently predictable structural film.[150]

J. Hoberman names the Cinema of Transgression as one of several "post-structuralist" turns in New York avant-garde film in the late 70s and through to the 80s, the others being "narrative features, autobiographies, [and] performance-psychodramas," each of which can be figured as a move away from the incumbent orthodoxy of structural film and its perceived medium-specific hermeticism.[151] Thus, among the less appreciated ways in which structuralism brought avant-garde film closer to the art world is the fact that, for the first time, it touched off a series of reactions to avant-garde film itself (rather than to, for example, popular culture) that were antagonistic and polemical in character, much as the art world of the twentieth century had witnessed a long chain of avant-gardisms retaliating against perceived blockages within art's

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[150] Nick Zedd, "The Cinema of Transgression Manifesto," in *You Killed Me First: The Cinema of Transgression*, ed. Susanne Pfeffer (Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art; Koenig Books, 2012), 17.
    Regina Cornwell writes of the Cinema of Transgression's underground – and structural – connection, "On the one hand there is the desire to shock, meretriciously using movie conventions from the thriller and suspense and gangster film for the sake of gratuitous cruelty and violence as in Beth B and Scott B's *Black Box*, 1978. There is also a leveling off of action as in Eric Mitchell's *Red Italy*, 1978, in which everything has equal weight within the inchoate narrative and nothing means very much—a series of poses, reminiscences of Warhol and his Factory Productions. So Warhol, having influenced the 'structural' film, reappears again as a strong influence. But this time the emphasis is on a different part of his work and contribution—one diametrically opposite to that which helped shape the 'structuralist' film." Cornwell, "Structural Film: Ten Years Later," 92.
[151] J. Hoberman, "Independents," *Film Comment* 16, no. 1 (February 1980): 43.

ideology and practice. Again, it can be argued that we have Sitney to thank for this, not simply

for christening the structural film, but for foregrounding the project of labelling and evaluating

genres of avant-garde cinema in the first place (against the intentions of many established

filmmakers, but with an unmistakable influence on future practitioners[152]) through his *Visionary*

Film morphology, conceivably doing more to splinter than to unify activities within avant-garde

cinema.

BRAKHAGE TAKES UMBRAGE

A final example of critical opposition will help prepare us for a discussion of the issue of

humour, or lack thereof, in what has been historically counted as structural film. In a particularly

ornery address to the Millennium Film Workshop in 1977, Stan Brakhage went on the record

with his distaste for the reigning cinema of structure:

> I mean, a decade for structuralism? Come on! Something's wrong there. And initially that
> coincided almost demonically with the hiring of a great number of film people and with
> the possibility for film critics to be getting jobs in universities under some program,
> however ephemeral, maybe lower than the janitor's office, but still is some solid semi-
> tenured existence. That accomplishment occurred at precisely the same moment that there
> was a drive emerging in totally different ways in different people, to put in the primary
> place, as content, the film's coming into existence, and being existing as the major
> subject matter. Also that a film could evolve itself once there was an idea arrived at,
> either through inspiration or not—usually not—which would itself create that film rather
> than the maker.[153]

[152] Regina Cornwell: "'Structural film' was devoured among the practitioners and followers of the film avant-garde here and in Europe at a time when there was a growing body of new work but still with only negligible commentary and then perhaps on an individual work or filmmaker. There was nothing until the Sitney essay appeared which attempted to mark off a group of works as a whole, distinguishing it from others, or to claim a movement." Cornwell, "Structural Film: Ten Years Later," 84. See also Bruce Jenkins' remarks on how Sitney primed audiences, Hollywood-style, to expect "genres" of avant-garde film. Bruce Jenkins, "Frampton Unstructured: Notes for a Metacritical History," *Wide Angle* 2, no. 3 (1978): 22.

[153] Stan Brakhage, "Stan Brakhage at Millennium: November 4, 1977," *Millennium Film Journal* 16–18 (Fall /Winter 1987 1986): 297–98. See, by contrast, Hollis Frampton's remarks: "I am completely cognizant, I think, of a couple things about Brakhage's work. One is that in the warmest sense of its importance, I feel nothing but sympathy and congratulations for the magnitude of that effort, its relentlessness, its coherence. Another thing I recognize very well about it is the extent to which it is predictable. That work, which also means that aesthetic strain, occupies and is likely to occupy for a very long time, the center of attention. I thought it particularly ironic that Brakhage complained so bitterly a couple of years ago at Millennium that the heir presumptive to the throne of

In many respects, Brakhage makes similar points to Zedd and Camper, chiefly the suggestion that the de-personalized, pre-planned structural film all too easily coincides with the ingress of critics and filmmakers into the academy, where a powerbase for theory-friendly structuralism could take hold. One of the implications here is that structural film earned an academic backing because it was easier to write about, not least because one needn't actually watch structural films to become an authority on them, so faithfully could they be reproduced by description.[154]

It is easy to see why Brakhage would feel personally affronted by this. His belief in film art conduces to "the possibility of film emerging through a human being that will increase sensibility, or show forth the hidden, or most important of all, at least celebrate and make clear process, wherein increased sensibility can occur."[155] The structural film places rigid limits on how a film can be experienced, foregrounding the "idea" (or, to use Brakhage's term, "ideology") of a film, out of which the film is then basically completed for artist and viewer alike. In this way, as Brakhage would have it, you arrive at experimental films like Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), whose "scripts" adequately substitute for, and can indeed prove more lasting than, the films themselves. The threat is in rendering the experience of making and seeing the film redundant or secondary ("—and let us have down with the use of film for a translation"[156]); this essentially explains Brakhage's initial horror at Michael Snow's machine-

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the ice king, structural film, had had a decade of flack, of reaction, of goodies, or what have you, at the moment when there must have been during that week 1,500 screenings of Brakhage films within the boundaries of Christendom." Frampton also observes that the "body of ersatz structural film[s]" is at least matched in size by the "body of 'poor-man's Brakhage.'" Hollis Frampton and Bill Simon, "Talking about Magellan: An Interview," in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins, The MIT Press Writing Art Series (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 246.

[154] Or so the story goes in Cornwell, "Structural Film: Ten Years Later," 84. Also note Paul Arthur's sight-unseen writings on Warhol's proto-structural *Empire* (1964). Paul Arthur, "Structural Film: Revisions, New Versions, and the Artifact," *Millennium Film Journal* 1/2 (Spring 1978): 5–7.

[155] Brakhage, "Stan Brakhage at Millennium: November 4, 1977," 298.

[156] Brakhage, 299.

programmed *La région centrale* (1971).[157] R. Bruce Elder keys in on a fundamental difference

between Brakhage films and those of the structural cinema: in Brakhage, the demands of

concentration on diverse visual stimuli leave little room to develop *expectations* around how the

film will develop, while by contrast the structural film simplifies its ordering of content so as to

actively invite "conjecture."[158] Such is the difference between dissolving into a film's

temporality, and having it in your grasp (say, as a script), even before the film starts. Elder's

essay has interesting implications for the question of humour in structural film, and I will return

to his points later on.

A related concern is looming here, even if Brakhage does not explicitly state it. Consider

Annette Michelson's suggestion about why Brakhage may have bristled at Warhol's films: could

it be that they "[regenerate], as it were, through the celebrated unblinking voyeuristic stare of

Warhol's camera, the time, the temporal axis of expectation along which narrative can be

reinstated"?[159] Not every structural film contains Warholian duration, but an "axis of

expectation" is found frequently enough to qualify as a key feature of the genre, and possibly

because of this narrative does begin to find its way, as my later discussion of Michael Snow will

show.[160] Expectation, if its provocation is to be felt as pertinent to the film at hand, arguably

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[157] Brakhage later called Snow's film "the pure aesthetic experience . . . even its rocks finally become moving rhythms, and its sky and earth and the whole weave of it . . ." Quoted in Suranjan Ganguly, "Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview," in *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Wheeler W. Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 160.

[158] R. Bruce Elder, "The Structural Film: Ruptures and Continuities in Avant-Garde Film," in *Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. David Hopkins (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2006), 124–25.

[159] Annette Michelson, "'Where Is Your Rupture?' Mass Culture and the Gesamtkunstwerk," in *Andy Warhol*, ed. Annette Michelson, October Files ; 2 (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001), 106.

[160] Peter Gidal has shown exasperation at the fact his counterparts in the North American structural cinema do not share his taboo on narrative. See, for example, the discussion of narrative in Peter Gidal, "Interview with Hollis Frampton," *October* 32 (Spring 1985): 103–11. In her canonical essay about Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, Annette Michelson credits Snow's film with re-introducing avant-garde film space to the "horizon of expectation" or "revelation" one finds in narrative cinema. Annette Michelson, "About Snow," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 111–25. A critique of Michelson's reading, arguing for recognition of the "dispersed spectrum" of activities in *Wavelength*, is offered in Philip Monk, "Around Wavelength: The Sculpture, Film and Photo-Work of Michael Snow from 1967 to 1969," in *Visual Art, 1951-1993 [The Michael Snow Project]* (Toronto: A.A. Knopf Canada, 1994), 324–39.

requires conditions of stability, and this opens the door for standards – technical but also in terms

of content and theme – that Brakhage might view as abhorrent to any notion of a free cinema.

From here, we are not far away from the standardized procedures of industrial cinema, which

may include the radical de-personalization of the filmmaking process. After all, what better way

to stabilize one's experiment than to extract the messy human element from it? Paul Arthur goes

so far as to argue that, "in order to overturn the denaturing and obscurant interventions of

subjective camera vision, Structural films following the lead of Warhol adopted industrial

standards of focus, lighting, color balance, framing, and camera stability."[161] Furthermore,

Arthur sees that the so-called "New Narrative" avant-garde film emergent in the 1980s takes up

certain priorities of structural film (while, of course, rejecting others), such as an emphasis on

mise-en-scène rather than editing, as a direct means of de-subjectivizing the camera look, in

other words, of challenging the Brakhagian approach.[162] The background for this de-

subjectivizing, too large to address here, would have to include screen – or in the most influential

cases, *Screen* – theory, particularly its feminist articulations. The push in this case – figured as an

avowedly political act left unfilled by the American structural film – is to evacuate the "mastery"

of subject-positioning camera vision in favour of activating the spectator, though as Arthur

points out, the brokering of this turn by way of industry-adjacent narrative methods is not

without its contradictions.[163]

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[161] Paul Arthur, "The Last of the Last Machine?: Avant-Garde Film since 1966," *Millennium Film Journal* 16–18 (Fall /Winter 1987 1986): 78. Arthur is not precisely clear on which structural films adopt these standards; surely the films of Michael Snow often fail, whether deliberately or not, to meet industry models of focus, lighting, and camera stability. The structural films of Morgan Fisher, on the other hand, may be said to take up industrial standards for the purpose of critique. See the remarks on Fisher in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

[162] Arthur, 79–80. See also Regina Cornwell on the films of Martha Haslanger and Manuel De Landa, which use "the technical devices [of structural cinema] evolved over the past ten years for clearly narrative intentions." Cornwell, "Structural Film: Ten Years Later," 90.

[163] "There is, to date, an unresolved contradiction between the principled refusal of privilege and mastery and the advocacy of a system which *requires* hierarchies of decision-making, to say nothing of the need to engage with a thoroughly coercive, instrumental philosophy of the marketplace." Arthur, "The Last of the Last Machine?: Avant-

The industrial savour of structural film was the target of Brakhage acolyte Gary

Doberman in a snarky missive titled "New York Cut the Crap," submitted to but rejected by

Millennium Film Journal. Here, Doberman takes up the mantle of Brakhage's offense at

structural film and advances it by many degrees of insult. Together with the familiar epithets that

structuralism is "over-rationalized," "tautologous," and amenable to academic "gamesmanship,"

Doberman commits the ultimate abuse of comparing the structural film to the underground's

arch rival, Hollywood:

> *Intermission:* structuralism does lead to some amusing contradictions. A Hollywood movie becomes a structural film from its machinelike withdrawal of person and lack of photographic reaction to visual phenomena. The Hollywood production apparatus is a machine shop programmed to produce similar objects. Hollywood is a very successful celluloid experiment in manufacturing deadening visual constructs. Millennium, S.F. Cinematheque and Anthology Film Archives do not screen experimental films; the local movie theater serves that function.[164]

This is plainly libelous. If anything, what structural film made compromises with, via the artist's

"cool" withdrawal from the filmmaking process (for example, by declining to handhold the

camera), is not commercial cinema but the gallery art world.[165] Nevertheless, we can add

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Garde Film since 1966," 84. Cf. Yvonne Rainer's remark: "as my texts become more explicitly theoretical or political, I feel a greater obligation to enclose them in a more totalized narrative and assign their utterance to more unified identities." Yvonne Rainer, "More Kicking and Screaming from the Narrative Front/Backwater," *Wide Angle* 7, no. 1 & 2 (1985): 10.

[164] Doberman, "New York Cut the Crap," 364.

[165] David E. James argues that, with structural film, "Art museums, galleries, and universities became the preferred place of exhibition." David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 272. For example, Michael Snow's films ←→ and *One Second in Montreal* had their premieres at the Whitney Museum in a 1969 show called "Extended Time Pieces," alongside works by Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Richard Serra, and Bruce Nauman. For more on the reputation of Snow's films in the New York art scene of the 60s, see A. L. Rees, "Working Both Sides of the Street," in *Michael Snow: Almost Cover to Cover* (London; Bristol: Black Dog Publishing; Arnolfini, 2001), 76–89.

This is not to suggest that structural film can be easily collapsed into so-called "artist's film" (i.e., the use of film by artists whose contexts remain the gallery and museum). For some suggestions on how to differentiate the two, see Jonathan Walley, "Modes of Film Practice in the Avant-Garde," in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London : New York: Tate Pub.: In association with Afterall; Distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, 2008), 182–99.

Lastly, it's worth noting that Joyce Wieland, one of Sitney's foundational structural filmmakers, has spoken of feeling pushed out by the relative prominence of Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton's films in art world discourse. See Lauren Rabinovitz, "Joyce Wieland and the Ascendancy of Structural Film," in *Points of Resistance: Women,*

Doberman's snide remarks to the discursive evidence suggesting that, in the eyes of many

keepers of the underground flame, structural film had violated a basic principle of

experimentalism: that the artist is first of all unbound in themselves and in their creative process.

Structuralism sold this out for a bureaucratic sensibility.

Doberman makes room for a few exceptions to the pernicious disease of structural film.

Notably, he celebrates Ken Jacobs' *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son* (1969) as a film that eschews the

predictability plaguing most structuralism, writing, "The only predictability in Jacobs' film is the

constant anticipation of more delights to come."[166] This is the same film that Brakhage once

referred to as "hilarious" and "probably an ultimate comedy," for how extensively it unpacks the

circus of activity contained in the silent short comedy upon which Jacobs practices a full

repertoire of re-photographic and metaphoric maneuvers.[167] The average viewer will be forgiven

if they have trouble finding a "laugh line" or moment of pointed humour in this "ultimate

comedy." To understand Brakhage, it helps to be familiar with the distinction, addressed in the

previous chapter, that Brakhage maintains between "Comedy" and "humouring." The latter

entails conditioning the laughter response through calculated means (call them laws of laughter),

whereas Comedy, if it is to be an Art, leaves the viewer "*free*, unto himself [sic]" by

"present[ing] an entire 'world' in such acceptance that one laughs in sheer pleasure of it and is

tickled by the natural contradictions implicit in it *and* that acceptance of it." You are not

"humoured" by Comedy; rather, through experiencing the wide compass of all that it accepts,

you discover in it "occasions for laughter." Brakhage is expressing here another version of his

belief that film art should "increase sensibility" through a process that is open to discoveries

Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71 (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 175.
[166] Doberman, "New York Cut the Crap," 358.
[167] Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End* (New York: McPherson & Company, 1989), 167.

(infinitely so) on the part of both artist and viewer. How could such a description possibly apply to a so-called structural film? Is Jacobs' film merely the exception that proves the rule – namely, that structural films follow too many rules?

We are now coming to the crux of my concern with structural humour. David E. James suggests that *Tom, Tom* is "post-structuralist" – like Barthes' *S/Z* – in that it opens the "object-text . . . to its own difference."[168] James continues: "Jacobs's refilming is a rewriting that conjures new narratives; by selecting this or that character for closer scrutiny, this or that event for reorganization, even reversing the original, he is able to discover in its story an anthology of new plots."[169] I will not fret over whether *Tom, Tom* is more exactly defined as a structural or post-structuralist work; instead, what interests me is the film's tendency towards copiousness, in relation to its formal parameters. I do not think this is entirely unique to Jacobs' film, and moreover it appears often enough in the recognized corpus of structural film to complicate any idea of the "tautological" or "minimalist" character of the genre. A simple way of looking at this is that structural films (at least the North American variety) tend to function ironically. For David E. James, irony is "the dominant trope of the structural film," due to the filmmaker's habit of incorporating science (objectivity) into the work while clinging to some germ of the Romantic belief that science can never extinguish the artist's soul.[170] That plenitude is a recurring theme or expression of content across a fair amount of so-called structural films suggests that filmmakers have more than small doses of ironizing ego in mind when they conduct their experiments.[171] The task in this chapter will be to show that the packed-in plenitude of my structural examples

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[168] David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 247.
[169] James, 249.
[170] James, 244.
[171] Graham Weinbren's essay "Six Filmmakers" discusses consciously reductive works of structuralist cinema which nonetheless show the (quite meager) contribution of the filmmaker. By the sounds of these films, they would leave Camper, Brakhage, and co. very unimpressed. Grahame Weinbren, "Six Filmmakers and an Ideal of Composition," *Millennium Film Journal* 3 (Winter 1979): 39–54.

betrays evidence of humorous irony. I do not take for granted that an incongruity like minimal/maximal in its barest form contains something of the humorous about it. In other words, it does seem to matter what kind of minimal, and what sort of maximal.

MICHAEL SNOW

My central case study is the work of Michael Snow, whom Sitney has dubbed the "dean of structural filmmakers."[172] I am by no means the first to catch wind of Snow's sense of humour. For instance, J. Hoberman has written on the jokes and gags in Snow's films, and has argued their "preference for humor over irony,"[173] by which I take Hoberman to mean that the comic pleasures in Snow are more likely to be low- than high-toned, vulgar than intellectual. I do not interpret this as a sign that irony is altogether missing from Snow, since vulgarity itself can be ironizing, just as it can be ironized through its framing in a work of art. One of my claims below is that vulgarity, with its eruptive force, is a way for Snow to overflow the metaphor of containment in his films, poking holes in their pretense of studious control. Likewise, the frequency of juvenile humour in Snow – not just in his films, but manifest in objects like his artist book *High School* – suggests that Snow harbours in his work something of the schoolboy as well as the schoolmaster. In light of Snow's juvenile streak, I will eventually touch on his affinities with that most influential figure on the art-mischief of the 1960s, Marcel Duchamp.

While Snow hasn't pledged any particular allegiance to the idea of "structure," he often speaks of an effort to set up "containers" in his films. *Wavelength*'s protracted zoom can be thought of as a conical container; ←→'s panning movements carve out their own bracket of space; the motorized, horizontally trucking apartment set in *Presents* is like a human-scale

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[172] Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 352.
[173] J. Hoberman, "Snow Joke," *The Village Voice*, September 28, 1982.

vivarium. Below, I propose a basic way in which Snow's films generate humour: by subjecting circumscribed forms to extensive pressure tests. The minimal-conceptual side of Snow – his predetermination of a film's "shape" or "container" – will be shown to interact in often humorous ways with his tendency to stretch out and exhaust the shape, for example, by exploring the effects of time, variations, and human/organic interference on it. I will argue this ranges beyond a weakness for, to coin a phrase, clown-car aesthetics (though certain images in, say, *Corpus Callosum* [2002] evoke precisely that), to a genuine comic sensibility that figures plenitude as a source of subversion, mirth, and vitality.

I take as my central example of these humour effects Snow's four-and-a-half-hour opus, *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974). With its encyclopedic volume of segments, diverse in content and formal approach, it is debatable whether this film falls under the "structural" heading; indeed, it may not be *a* structural film but rather twenty-five of them. Snow does, however, select a "container" for the film as a whole, namely, cinema's "sound-image relationships," from which he spins a multitude of variations. Snow has referred to *Rameau's* as a "sound comedy," and in this chapter I will flesh out how Snow's designation of "comedy" obtains in a number of senses. One is that *Rameau's* directly concerns the cultural-social insofar as it addresses language (it is made for "English-speaking audiences") and hosts a human cast in the dozens. It therefore presses on the usual subject matter of the comedy genre: the common, social world and its conventions. This social concentration can in turn be figured as an emphasis on the "vulgar," in the sense of both the common and crude sides of comedy. Bodily-function humour makes its presence felt – or, heard – in the film. Most important for my purposes, by indulging the rich possibilities afforded by the film's "container" – viz., sound-image relationships – Snow participates in what literature scholar Robert S. Dupree

has called the "main figure" of the "rhetoric" of comedy: the "copious inventory."[174] The object

of this chapter is finally to understand this comic copiousness not as a refutation of the tenets

Sitney ascribes to structural film, but as an impulse lurking in many structural films from the

beginning. Where this copious impulse originates is a matter for contextualization that harkens

back to the underground cinema as well as touches on wider cultural factors.

TICKLISH TAUTOLOGIES

My discussion of Snow and other filmmakers will bypass the notion that structural films

were "tautologous" in character, in other words that their premises and results were essentially

identical.[175] Such a notion was used both to excoriate structural film as an enemy of the open-

ended cinema, and to contextualize it as a contribution to the minimalism and/or conceptualism

that were then occupying the art world's attention. Sitney attempted to nip this accusation in the

bud when he stated in the second version of his essay, "It is unfortunate that the films I am

discussing have been confused with 'simple' forms or 'concept art.' It is precisely when the

material becomes multifaceted and complex, without distracting from the clarity of the over-all

shape, that these films become interesting."[176] I agree with Sitney, and share many of his

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[174] Robert S. Dupree, "The Copious Inventory of Comedy," in *The Terrain of Comedy*, ed. Louise Cowan (Dallas, TX: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1984), 163–94.

[175] The tautology accusation is common in critiques of structuralism, though mobilized differently at the whims of the critic. For example, there is Doberman's allegation of "tautological narcissism," which assails the filmmaker's inability to venture out beyond their single idea about a film, "to spring metaphoric echoes" within their material. Doberman, "New York Cut the Crap," 358. On the other hand, when Deke Dusinberre ponders the issue of tautologies in structural film, he is grappling with the idea of a reduction of a film's content to a medium-specific illustration – "a film is a film" – which doesn't leave much room for generating meaning from the work. It is clear, however, that Dusinberre is interested in processes of meaning making that are non-metaphoric. Deke Dusinberre, "The Ascetic Task: Peter Gidal's *Room Film* 1973," in *Structural Film Anthology*, ed. Peter Gidal (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 111. I do not believe tautological considerations obtain in the structural films I am concerned with in this chapter. This is not to say that striving to make tautologous work lacks its own valid art-historical reasons, just that the filmmakers I'm looking at had limited interest in these reasons.

[176] Sitney, "Structural Film," 1970, 329.

examples. Before I continue, however, I would like to take a brief moment to address the issue of filmic tautologies, as they too can be generative of humour.

The prime instance of filmic tautologies is Fluxus, which George Maciunas propagandized in his reply to Sitney as the art world antecedent from which structural film had plagiarized the most.[177] Examples of tautology in the Fluxfilm catalogue include Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962-64), a loop of clear film leader, and Maciunas' *10 Feet* (1966), ten feet of film with prestype numbers counting out each foot. Leaving aside the hair-splitting over whether these films are *truly* tautologous, it is obvious enough that they aspire to the condition of a tautology. In fact, as Tod Lippy states, Maciunas' preferred term for this tautological aspiration was "concretism," where "the form and expression remain [the] same as the content and perception."[178] What this offered was a reprieve from such art hang-ups as aesthetic transcendence and the hallowed authority of the artist, since making a film as one-to-one simple as *10 Feet* could be done by just about anyone. Thus, Fluxus is more (willfully) susceptible to many of the charges brought against structural film – for example, that it denies the artist-as-self and is easily appropriated or "gamed," as the marketing to the public of Fluxus "scores" for individual works makes fairly clear.

Humour was centrally important to Flux practices. In a manifesto written in 1965, Maciunas contrasts "Art," overrun with elitism, pretentions, and avarice, to "Fluxus Art-Amusement," which aims to disrupt the professionalism and inaccessibility of the art world. This was to be achieved through the simplification of art practice, in the making of art that required no skill and recognized no higher purpose than to amuse. Fluxus art-amusement is

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[177] Maciunas claims Warhol's *Sleep*, *Eat* (1964), and *Empire* each plagiarize a particular Fluxfilm. Maciunas, "On 'Structural Film' (by P. Adams Sitney)."

[178] Tod Lippy, "Disappearing Act: The Radical Reductivism of Fluxus Film," in *FluxAttitudes*, ed. Cornelia Lauf and Susan Hapgood (Gent: Imschoot Uitgevers, 1991), 38.

the rear-guard without any pretention or urge to participate in the competition of "oneupmanship" with the avant-garde. It strives for the monostructural and nontheatrical qualities of simple natural event, a game or a gag. It is the fusion of Spikes Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp.[179]

As inclusive as Maciunas made Fluxus sound, he was also establishing ground rules for its practice. One's participation in Fluxus seemed to hinge on an adherence to monomorphism, and an amusing kind at that; as David T. Doris writes, "a Fluxus work must be direct and simple, like a good joke, in order to be effective, in order to be *Fluxus*."[180] According to Bruce Jenkins, the humour of Fluxus was partially influenced by the gag-oriented silent comedians, whose one-at-a-time gag structures and knack for thumbing their noses at bourgeois values comported well with Fluxus' anti-art mission. The making of filmic tautologies could not only be a way to simplify art, but also to play a gag on art films with loftier pretentions, including underground films steeped in personal "mythopoeisis"; see, as an example, Dick Higgins' Fluxfilm *Invocation of Canyons and Boulders (for Stan Brakhage)* (1966), a short film loop of a mustachioed mouth (the allusion to Brakhage is hard to miss) chewing exaggeratedly, and it seems rather self-seriously, in close-up.[181]

We might ask how clever a gag could be within the Zen-like (by way of John Cage) simplicity of Fluxus. It would seem the minute you look for sophistication in a Flux gag, you begin to misunderstand it. To quote Maciunas, Fluxus is "against intentional, conscious

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[179] Quoted in Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus Codex* (Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection in association with H.N. Abrams, New York, 1988), 26.

[180] David T. Doris, "Zen Vaudeville: A Medi(t)ation in the Margins of Fluxus," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chicester, West Sussex; New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 119.

[181] "The target of Fluxfilm humour, however, was often directed less at the medium in general or the social order *per se* and more at the hierarchies internal to the contemporary art world—especially the deadly earnest, serious film culture represented by the leading form of avant-garde film-making of the day, the personal and poetic (or, more properly, 'mythopoeic') cinemas of artists such as Kenneth Anger, Bruce Baillie and Stan Brakhage . . . In place of personal content, the Fluxfilms countered with the institutional, the functional and/or the minimal." Bruce Jenkins, "Fluxfilms in Three False Starts," in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London : New York: Tate Pub.: In association with Afterall; Distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, 2008), 57.

formalism and against the fixation of art on meaning."[182] (So, perhaps we shouldn't read too

much into Higgins' gag on Brakhage.) Interpretation of a Flux work could be limited to the

discerning of what Dick Higgins calls the "horizon" or basic pattern in evidence, to which the

audience can reorient their horizon, with minimal strain. Higgins likens this shift of horizons to

the apprehension of a joke, choose any content you wish:

> The matter of horizons takes place in any hermeneutic art process – it is inherent in the
> discovery of the horizons. But in watching a Fluxperformance, examples are all the more
> important since they involve discovering the pattern of the performance, the what-is-
> being-done. Quite often this discovery, detecting the example aspect of the horizon,
> comes to the viewer with a striking impact; it is like 'getting' the point of a joke. And, in
> fact, the similarity between even non-humorous Fluxpieces and jokes is striking. Even
> when the piece is serious, one tends to react *as if* the piece were a joke, since a joke is the
> nearest thing on one's horizon to many Fluxpieces.[183]

In order for the work's pattern to dawn on the audience with "striking impact," it must not be

obfuscatory. Yoko Ono's Fluxfilm *Eye Blink* (1966) consists of fifteen seconds of an eye

opening in slow motion. This is what the film is, and as seriously as the artist may or may not

have intended its making, the audience will "get" that this is what the film is with the quick

impact of a joke (a joke easily understood, one should say), because, as Higgins suggests, the

closest comparison for the sharp cognitive effect of Fluxus is joking. Again, the "joke" will not

be too complex. Higgins uses the example of a piece called *Eight*, in which eight balloons

consecutively enter the stage of the performance. The audience will grasp from the title, *Eight*,

that eight balloons constitute the horizon of the piece, and this sudden shift of understanding, as

the balloons enter one by one, will tickle the audience. However, if the performer were to bring

out only seven balloons, this would be a "tricky joke that dissolves into cleverness and amuses

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[182] Quoted in Jon Hendricks, "Foreword," in *Fluxus Codex*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Detroit, Mich: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection in association with H.N. Abrams, New York, 1988), 23.
[183] Dick Higgins, "Fluxus Theory and Reception," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chicester, West Sussex; New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 231.

only the teller."[184] It seems best to err on the side of the humble tautology where Flux humour is concerned, so as to maintain a balanced relation between artist and audience.

With this talk of horizons and discovery comes the danger of lumping all acts of sudden pattern-detection under the category of humour. Surely there are finer differences to be cognizant of. Ken Friedman argues that the importance of gags to Fluxus has been overstated, for the perfectly good reason that when Fluxus came on the scene, "Art was so heavily influenced by rigidities of conception, form and style that the irreverent Fluxus attitude stood out like a loud fart in a small elevator." Gags, pranks, and humour can be counted as just part of the general Fluxus idea of "playfulness." Writes Friedman, "Play comprehends far more than humour. There is the play of ideas, the playfulness of free experimentation, the playfulness of free association and the play of paradigm shifting that are as common to scientific experiment as to pranks."[185] Friedman is no doubt justified in drawing these distinctions. At the same time, however, he helps to anchor Higgins' stray observation that audiences tend to react to even non-humorous Fluxus as humorous, "since a joke is the nearest thing on the horizon to many Fluxpieces." Taking their remarks together, Friedman and Higgins hint that commonalities exist between discoveries of the humorous, scientific, and artistic kind.

Here we are in proximity to the argument of Arthur Koestler's famous study *The Act of Creation*. Koestler theorizes a spectrum along which processes of humour, science, and art sit and blend into one another; the purpose of the study is "to show that all patterns of creative activity are tri-valent: they can enter the service of humour, [scientific] discovery, or art."[186] Koestler's major pattern of creativity is what he calls the *bisociation* of two seemingly

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[184] Higgins, 231.
[185] Ken Friedman, "Fluxus and Company," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chicester, West Sussex; New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 249.
[186] Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1964), 27.

incompatible "matrices," or forms of coded experience, which yields a hidden relation through a "*double-minded*, transitory state of unstable equilibrium when the balance of both emotion and thought is disturbed."[187] Jokes, as Koestler demonstrates, typically involve the perception of the simultaneity of two frames of reference, seemingly incongruous but brought together in a clash (punchline) of unspoken connection (e.g., wholesome mother love and the Oedipal complex). By each partaking in bisociative acts, humour, scientific discovery, and art are shown to be creative in structurally similar ways, their specificity consisting in the different emotional and functional needs they respectively fulfill (and even then there seems to be overlap; for instance, the "beauty of mathematical proofs"). For Koestler, creativity is about escaping routinized thinking and behaving, and bisociation produces flashes of insight that take us out of our habits, revealing connections between previously separate matrices of experience.

Koestler strives for a complete account of what humour is and how it affects us. He argues that humour basically appeals to *self-assertive* or *aggressive-defensive* emotions in its characteristic build-up of expectation; at the point of surprise collision or sudden bisociation, the emotions aroused by expectation are derailed at the moment thought (being nimbler than emotion) leaps from one associative context to another. This leaves us with a redundancy of emotion that, owing to its inertia and persistence, must find an outlet to release its tension; hence, "it is *emotion deserted by thought* which is discharged in laughter."[188] As we travel along Koestler's triptych or spectrum of creative acts, humour begins to resemble scientific discovery when its bisociative logic requires and rewards greater intellectual effort (e.g., the difference between a crude joke and a clever witticism). This is where "seeing the joke" and "solving the

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[187] Koestler, 35.
[188] Koestler, 59.

problem" begin to shade into one another, and also, perhaps, where we leave off aggressive laughter in favour of quieter displays of intellectually gratified amusement.[189]

Of course, Koestler's model can only take us so far in our present discussion. His paradigmatic examples of humour, science, and art do not reckon with such a thing as Fluxus, which may be said to play in the blended mid-spaces between humorous, scientific, and artistic discovery, perhaps not delivering fully sufficient and familiar forms of any of these. Fluxus also directly opposes the idea of cleverness, and originality for that matter, and consequently acts of snap insight or bisociation are kept to a minimum. What we have instead, in many Flux works, is concentration on a single easily detectable matrix – or, roughly, what we could call a horizon, a simple pattern of activity (e.g., chewing), isolated (stripped of associations) and identifiable as the object on which to concentrate. So how can this single-minded activity pass into humour? We might say that the single matrix of a Fluxpiece deliberately *suspends* the idea of its creativity, restricting the notion of discovery to the simple detection of what-is-being-done – which seems equivalent to the perception of a tautology. Whether we experience this discovery of pattern as structurally similar to getting a joke or solving (should we say vanquishing?) a problem seems equally a matter of one's own horizon of intellectual and emotional priorities, and a product of Flux styles of staging. If, as Higgins says, the humour horizon tends to predominate in responses to Fluxus works, we could argue this is attributable to a number of factors: to the brevity or economy typical of the Flux work, which reminds one of the economy of jokes; to the priority humour receives when it presents itself as a viable option (i.e., its irresistibility, or its option of release from an expectation that hasn't amounted to much); and to that vague entity known as the "spirit of the times," in which Fluxus' audiences were primed to expect art to "put them on" in some fashion.

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[189] Koestler, 92.

STRUCTURAL FILM AND JOKING

Pattern-detection is also key to the experience and pleasure of viewing structural films, but here we pass beyond tautologies and into richer associative territory. The notion of structure need not be limited to the descrying of a film's essential "shape." In one of the few articles to directly defend Sitney from his critics, R. Bruce Elder trusts (and, I believe, we must follow this trust if we are to address the larger body of structural work) that Sitney's intention was to describe the type of film "whose outline is established before the shooting or the editing has taken place, or which responds, in a systematic and predetermined fashion, to events that arise during the shooting or editing."[190] Shape is perhaps one way of pre-establishing a formal outline in structural films, but Elder argues we can extend Sitney to mean structures in the form of "systems" or "formulas." The system, shape, or formula is the "primary impression" which exerts a determining force on all else in the work; in this way it differs from work in the previous avant-garde, such as that of Brakhage, which presents a form open enough – non-systematic – to "reconcile diversity" in its, often quite personally expressive, contents. Another way to figure this difference is from the standpoint of temporality, previously noted: where Brakhage tends towards an "all-at-once temporality" that reconciles a dense flux of imagery, structural work typically foregrounds duration and temporal extension as such. Along this extended temporal axis evolves the primary pattern, system, or shape of the structural work, the concentration upon which enjoins the spectator to engage in processes of "apperception" and "conjecture"; said processes were never before as central to the experience of watching avant-garde films.[191]

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[190] Elder, "The Structural Film: Ruptures and Continuities in Avant-Garde Film," 123.
[191] Elder, 124–25.

With no sense of irony or shame, Elder likens the spectator's typical response to a structural film to what occurs in the case of narrative drama. That is, one proceeds in a structural film through successive stages: first, one inhabits a period of unknowing, where order has yet to establish itself; then, as the film's "determining principle" begins to become clear, one guesses that it is organized by a systematic procedure; lastly, one reaches the denouement of the film, where the revealed system "works itself out [in structural films] . . . seemingly impersonally," often resulting in a feeling approaching "delight" for the spectator.[192] While this analogy may seem slightly cumbersome (in what sense are narrative denouements "impersonal"?), it is evident that structural film as we know it – and many of the critical attacks agree on this point – generally encourages analysis along a temporal axis where a basic organizational principle can be confirmed, much to our pleasure as creatures who enjoy having cognitive authority over our perceptions. This places us in the region of what Hollis Frampton, not incidentally theorizing about "comic art," describes as the "special gratification that can come at the moment when one perceives that a form has fulfilled itself."[193]

Is it fair to say that humour can be read into structural films, as in Fluxus, because of the way the viewer might suddenly "get" the films' "what-is-being-done"? I would suggest this claim requires some qualifications. First, as Elder's narrative analogy alludes to, the ordering principle of a structural film is generally not quickly discernible, in the way the basic pattern of a Fluxpiece is transmitted to the viewer with the flash of a punchline (one should say, a punchline of blunt simplicity and little build-up). Even a relatively short structural film (non-humorous, in this case) with minimal perceptual content such as Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970) does not lay bare the rules of its ordering (this includes the uses it makes of different lens lengths in

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[192] Elder, 127–28.
[193] Frampton and Simon, "Talking about Magellan: An Interview," 234.

addition to its more secret permutational structure) with the instant clarity we often encounter in Fluxus.[194] This appears to exempt structural films from the "timing" which we might take as critical to humour's appeal, though we cannot forget the possibility of the "slow burn." Second, and relatedly, detecting the ordering principle of a structural film can be a complex affair and, besides, even when it appears to be simple, may only tell one side of the story of "what-is-being-done." While there is no delay in grasping that the primary "shape" in Michael Snow's ←→ will be the horizontal pan, this does not make predictable the variables in how the shape will be *used* over the duration of the film, including the metrically distinct velocities of the pan, the human activities which the pans both depict and deform, as well as the counterposing of vertical tilts towards the end of the film. In other words, "getting" that the horizontal pan is the leading (pre)determinant of the film is only step one of a pattern-detection that will carry on to encompass a number of suggestive interrelationships and incongruities with other patterns.[195] This may result in a waxing and waning of immediate amusements (I think any fair assessment of humour in Snow's films must admit this), however, from another vantage point it is possible to see how such an enterprise conduces to a more global comic patterning, gradually making itself detectable through the course of the film. All of which is to say that despite what Fluxus calls the "implicativeness" of its pieces – in other words, that its choice of minimal material should enlarge the external possibilities for future works[196] – it is by design allergic to the

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[194] James Peterson notes a tendency in longer structural films containing a "simple schematic" to prolong the matter of problem-solving through "*solution inhibition* and *solution multiplication*." James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avante-Garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 107.

[195] In an article on the many facets of humour in Snow's films, André Habib addresses the laughter that is produced by the "*discovery* of the logic of [Snow's films]": "If we say that several Snow movies have one or more sets of *rules*, laughter *occurs* in relation to 1) discovery, or recognition of these rules, 2) their exhaustion, or 3) a saturation effect of the rules of the game itself (each of these categories can be found in the other)." André Habib, "Rire avec," *Hors Champ*, February 18, 2003, https://www.horschamp.qc.ca/spip.php?article96. Translation from French by Google.

[196] Friedman, "Fluxus and Company," 250.

expansion of implications and the development of pattern-testing and -revision we find *internal to* many structural films. Therefore, we can agree neutrally with something Sitney probably intended as a jab: "If we think of the structural films as cinematic propositions in a rigorously ordered form, the 'Fluxus' films would be tautologies."[197]

Again, I would like to stress that saying a process of pattern-detection is *like* getting a joke is not equivalent to proving its pattern-object *involves* joking. Koestler would not argue that the similar creativities of humour, science, and art render their objects and effects indistinguishable. In Fluxus, however, one can hardly be blamed for grabbing at the joke as a nearby comparison to the artistic display on offer, since Fluxpieces tend to rely on performances of brevity and simple punctuation, without apparent ulterior meaning; we feel compelled to react *somehow* to the minimal pattern we've been invited to witness, in a characteristically theatrical address. Perhaps the very lack of cleverness in Fluxus – as art, or humour, or, least of all, science – reinforces the impression of a deadpan joke. Structural film does not immediately present itself to this impression, for reasons suggested above: it is prone to extended duration, inhibiting the appreciation of its ordering as a "put-on" or "pulling a fast one" in the Fluxus mode, instead risking the impatience and resentment of the audience; and it can place demands on the audience to discover the secret of its patterning, in a way that might feel more like work than play. The examples of humorous structural film I have in mind do not assume that pattern-detection is next to joke-detection. Rather, they pay attention to how patterns play off contents; that is, they make specific decisions around these factors that inflect their points of exchange – could we here say bisociation? – as visibly and meaningfully humorous. By this, I do not suggest that structural filmmakers predetermine to make the audience laugh (most avant-garde filmmakers would deny *expecting* any such reaction from the audience), only that they erect systems that play host to a

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[197] Sitney, "Structural Film," 1970, 346.

field of ironies between form and content. As I will elaborate later, with a nod to Brakhage, in some ways it may be more appropriate to speak of the overall "comedy" of certain structural films, rather than restricting emphasis to their point-by-point "humour."

On the other hand, I wouldn't wish to be too systematic at this stage. Maybe it's best we look at some film examples.

ACADEMIC MATTER AS FODDER

There are admitted challenges to accepting the comic reading of structural films. That we as viewers should be tasked with learning a system, across an extended duration – this sounds like a recipe for very dry and didactic films, indeed. When structural work is charged with being "academic," it is partly for the reason that it has the pretense to *teach* us something, specifically a lesson the film already knows and inscribes as its structure. Hence, Fred Camper's complaint that structural films at their worst treat the viewer like a "dull pupil."[198] It is worth remarking, on the other hand, that some of the most stimulating structural films directly address themselves to education-related subject matter, with an eye to questioning or slyly poking fun at systems of learning.[199]

For example, Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970) opens with the reading of alphabetically ordered practice sentences from *The Bay State Primer*, an eighteenth-century educational text designed for children. From here, the film moves into its silent, forty-five-minute middle section, in which Frampton shows in repeating, one-second-at-a-time sequence the Roman twenty-four-letter alphabet (the letters *i* and *j* are interchangeable, as are the letters *u*

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[198] Camper, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," 113.
[199] An example of a quote-unquote structural film that acts as a teaching tool, without becoming didactic, is Ken Jacobs' *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son*. On the "pedagogical imperatives" of this film, see Michael Zryd, "Professor Ken," in *Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*, ed. Michele Pierson, David E. James, and Paul Arthur (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 255.

and *v*). Each letter is represented by a word filmed off signage in the wilds of New York City (with several exceptions); gradually the alphabetical set is substituted for a set of repeating (though not looping) non-literal imagery – for the letter *x*, a roaring fire; for *o*, a man bouncing a ball in multi-exposure; for *i/j*, hamburger passing through a grinder, and so forth. As Paul Arthur writes, "the didactic 'lesson' inscribed by the structural development of *Zorns Lemma* is that of a substitution of visual acuity and sensuality for language-based, 'rote' comprehension."[200] I would suggest this "lesson" is also a kind of teasing game: by their alphabet-adjacent ordering, a set of images will be gradually "learned" or committed to memory. However, by dint of these images' tantalizing non-definition (we may know by heart that "waves" – these waves – stand for *z*, and so—?), our mind is also sprung loose on a free play of associations and guesswork, which takes us quite beyond the purview of knowledge-by-recitation.[201] At the same time, we may notice that the repeating images have replaced not just repeating letters, but non-repeating words – e.g., *answer, ant, arbor* – with their own baggage of meanings. Surely, it comes as some relief to have the seemingly endless array of words, with their eye-fixing and flattening effect, written over by sensuous forms which untether vision (on the other hand, the suspense of anticipating which letter will be supplanted next can be killer). Yet do we not realize, the more the words drop out and their image-replacements take over (many of these images inscribing a determinate temporal destination, such as tying a shoe), that all along this verbal cornucopia has been planting image-associations in our mind of unpredictable variety?[202] *Zorns Lemma* seems to

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[200] Arthur, *A Line of Sight*, 200.

[201] Frampton has called the participatory structure of *Zorns Lemma* its "candy coating." Quoted in Jenkins, "Frampton Unstructured: Notes for a Metacritical History," 28. In a further sign of his ironic stance on his film's systematicity, Frampton encoded "misfortunes" into *Zorns Lemma* – errors in frame count, "lapses of taste," faked "found" images. Hollis Frampton, "*Zorns Lemma*: Script and Notations," in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins, The MIT Press Writing Art Series (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 197–99.

[202] Cf. Paul Arthur's quarrel with the notion of "low-level signifiers" in the work of Peter Gidal: "an image of a leaf is never 'leaf,' as in language (nor is a pregnant woman 'pregnant woman'); it is always a 'brown leaf with spots' or

multiply rather than reduce the complexities involved in the education of our senses, while at the same time delivering to us that "special gratification that can come at the moment when one perceives that a form has fulfilled itself," which Frampton calls a feature of the "comic" in art.

Recall that structural films were further labelled "academic" because they were often made within the context of film schools (with films such as *Serene Velocity* and ←→ shot on campuses), as well as sponsored, with disproportionate attention, by academic scholars. Patricia Mellencamp identifies a group of works more or less under the structural heading that humorously delve into their context of academic production and reception. These are films that "critique a 'disciplinary society,' thereby biting the context and theory that feeds them."[203] One of Mellencamp's case studies is the work of George Landow, our resident parodist of avant-garde cinema spotlighted at the outset of this chapter. In such films as *Institutional Quality* (1969) and its sequel/remake, *New Improved Institutional Quality: In the Environment of Liquids and Nasals a Parasitic Vowel Sometimes Develops* (1976), Landow has an offscreen narrator administer comprehension exams to and about onscreen subjects, with deliberately inconclusive and meandering results. Another of Mellencamp's case studies is Robert Nelson's film *Bleu Shut* (1971), whose centrepiece is a timed guessing game played by offscreen voices regarding the nicknames of private yachts (is the boat in the picture called "Miss-Take"? "Swunurful"? "Mick Stup Bunks"?), an activity with which the participants are clearly having a lot of fun, but one that can be nonetheless situated, per Mellencamp, in proximity to "the Pavlovian real of school (replete with controlled buzzers, numbers, and clocks)."[204] In both the Nelson film and the work

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a 'translucent leaf.' Its specificity, its quantity of denotative information, can work either to heighten or depress cultural associations." Paul Arthur, "Structural Film: Revisions, New Versions, and the Artifact. Part Two," *Millennium Film Journal* 4/5 (Summer 1979): 129.

[203] Patricia Mellencamp, "Receivable Texts: U.S. Avant-Garde Cinema, 1960-1980," *Wide Angle* 7, no. 1–2 (1985): 81.

[204] Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video & Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 85.

of Landow, "tests" are interrupted by passages of seeming distraction and daydreaming, as if to simulate the wandering thoughts of the pupil restless for diversion, or of the student with a host of other questions on the brain.

These Frampton, Landow, and Nelson films can be considered "participatory films."[205] To the extent that any structural film invites apperception or conjecture about its determinate system, it might be thought of as participatory; however, the participation films discussed here foreground their structuring as games, tests, and pseudo-lectures, soliciting from the viewer a doubly active attention to the mental tasks expected of them. Another film in this line is Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), also cited in Mellencamp's group of films "about" academic matters. In this, a film Snow considers one of his only *intentionally* funny works,[206] the audience is treated to a philosophical exercise-cum-stand-up routine, parcelled out in a silent "word / after / word / system" where each consecutive image corresponds to a single typeset word in the lecture. The audience's mentality is addressed directly throughout. For instance, an early joke is played on audience anticipation when Snow writes, "This / film / will / be / about / 2 / hours / long. / Does / that / seem / like / a / frightening / prospect? / Well, / look / at / it / this / way: / how / do / you / know / this / isn't / lying?" Over the course of the (only forty-eight-minute) film, Snow's "word / after / word /system" shows itself to be an ingenious suspense tool, which practically invites the audience to fill in the blanks and finish its sentences, as if gesturing to the structural cinema's problem(atic) of predictability. Snow controls the duration of each word-image for what might best be described as crack comic timing. When Snow spells out certain medium-specific questions his film might raise – namely, "Why / would / anyone / want / to / do

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[205] The term is borrowed from Sitney's *Visionary Film* by Tom Gunning, "The Participatory Film," *American Film* 1 (October 1975): 81–83.
[206] See Snow's remarks in Robert Enright, "The Lord of Missed Rules: An Interview with Michael Snow," Border Crossings, May 2007, https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/the-lord-of-missed-rules-an-interview-with-michael-snow.

/ such / a / thing / as / this?" and "Wouldn't / a / book / be / better?" – the questions are worded in rapid, evenly measured installments; conversely, Snow's reply – that he will try to respond when the film is over, if the film hasn't already answered these questions – is worded in more deliberate and varied measure, as if signalling the master's generous patience (or, condescension) over the eager-beaver pupil.

Besides these forms of direct address, *So Is This* often explicitly instructs the audience to take action, both mentally and physically. Before a section about censorship – complete with subliminal flash frames of the words "Tits," "Ass," "Cock," and "Cunt" – Snow asks that any children in the audience cover their eyes. Later, Snow counts down the audience into a sing-a-long (mind that you keep it to yourself, and refrain from mouthing the words, please) which turns out to be, much to our happy relief, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." To see the film with an audience, one can hardly help experiencing this moment as an imagined, roaring chorus. The just-right length of time Snow grants to the image of "O" in "Over" demonstrates how alive with communal – so near to comic – energy simple film duration can be.

So Is This is, as Mellencamp writes, a film in continuous conversation with its reception. Snow gestures playfully not only to how *this* film will be received – by the censors, by the critics, by general audiences – but also how his career in films has been received to this point. (He wonders aloud – in his silent "word / after / word / system" – why his films haven't reached popular audiences.) With a detectible edge of sarcasm, Snow promises that *this* film will eventually come around to talking about something other than itself (i.e., *This*) – meaning, "some / real / human / stuff / that / will / make / you / laugh / and / cry / and / change / society." Those in the know will recall the dismissiveness with which Snow has treated "social-cause" art, which

Snow believes is weakened by its looming expiration date and nearness to "advertising."[207] It

comes as no surprise that Snow avoids commentary on the issues of the day in *So Is This*;

however, by mentioning these issues in passing – for example, "There'll / be / not / one / word /

about / El / Salvador" (true enough: there'll be two) – Snow nonetheless tags the film with up-to-

the-moment historical context (see also the film's references to the Ontario Censor Board –

specifically to its chairperson at the time, Mary Brown), ironizing its attempts to establish the

deictic *This* as just "this," something of a modernist art object par excellence, the evasive

properties of which propose to secure a timeless (self)reference.[208] Of course, this irony may be

less a self-critique then another case of Snow finding the advantage in having it both ways. He

says of *So Is This*, "I'd like the film to keep going, and part of what's going to keep it going is

that it's always going to be new and it's always going to be old. It's going to have its time

inscribed but it's also always going to be *this* – whatever it looks like."[209] Is this having your

aura and depleting it, too?

In a final sign that Snow has "read the room" in preparing his text, he assures the

audience this has not been his attempt at practicing "in-depth / semiological / analysis," an

academicism there's no doubt many "cultivated" viewers (to use Snow's word) will feel

compelled to apply to the film. Snow does not wish to "talk / over / the / heads / of / people" (not

figuratively anyway) so as "to / cater / to / a / small / but / vocal / intellectual / element / in / our /

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[207] For Snow's remarks on the "advertising" of social-cause art, see Bruce Elder and Michael Snow, "On Sound, Sound Recording, Making Music of Recorded Sound, The Duality of Consciousness and Its Alienation from Language, Paradoxes Arising from These Matters," in *Music/Sound, 1948-1993: The Performed and Recorded Music/Sound of Michael Snow, Solo and with Various Ensembles, His Sound-Films and Sound Installations: Improvisation/Composition from 1948 to 1993*, ed. Michael Snow (Toronto: A.A. Knopf, 1994), 225. For an essay offering Snow's political positions, see Michael Snow, "Crafts," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, ed. Louise Dompierre (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 31–37.

[208] In Christian Metz's reading, Snow's sentences say, "'Look, it is very funny, you will see, you *see* my film. It consists in what you are seeing just now, right now; and since there is nothing other to see, you will see it completely.'" Christian Metz, "Third Degree Cinema?," *Wide Angle* 7, no. 1 & 2 (1985): 32.

[209] Michael Snow, "Present Tense Situation: Michael Snow Comments on *So Is This*," in *Words & Moving Images: Essays on Verbal and Visual Espression in Film and Television*, ed. William C. Wees and Michael Dorland (Montréal, Québec: Médiatexte Publications, 1984), 31.

society." Such cues have led Thierry de Duve to pose *So Is This* as the product of Snow's dismay with the critical reception to his previous film, *Presents*. By de Duve's account, the first two, patently "structuralist" parts of *Presents* were well received by semiotically inclined critics – those for whom film images are always ineluctably illusory and incapable of showing or "presenting" anything but their status as film language. However, the third and longest part of *Presents*, in which Snow moves beyond the confines of the studio to capture a multitude of documentary- or diary-like images from the world at large (organized around the theme of "presenting"), only confounded these same critics who had lost their ability to "see" what images show.[210] Per de Duve, Snow's *So Is This* announces, "Since the most in-the-know critics don't want to see, but only to read, let's quite literally give them a film to read."[211] That will teach them a lesson. No doubt, *So Is This* has several "lessons" and directives to impart – not just about the myopia of the cognoscenti, but about the fertility of language; about the bigness of "big" and the attenuatedness of "attenuated" – and yet, for all this, one notices how studiously Snow's film avoids "lecturing" the audience.

MICHAEL SNOW'S CRUDE EDUCATION

If, as Sitney avers, Michael Snow is to be thought of as the "dean" of structural filmmakers, it must be said that Snow is not so strict and authoritarian as that appellation might stereotypically suggest. On the one hand Snow's films demand long and intense concentration on

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[210] Snow has spoken of his attempt to set a "trap" with *Presents*, which would expose his prospective audience's bias in favour of the first sections of the film, hence, for film viewing as a self-congratulatory, theory-centric activity. "I feel there's been less free seeing or less open seeing amongst cognoscenti of film in the last few years, and more tendency to want to see what you already know in the sense of affirmation of the correctness of your views." Quoted in Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Film: The Front Line, 1983* (Denver: Arden Press, 1983), 183.

[211] Thierry de Duve, *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2001), 47. What de Duve ignores are the feminist critiques of *Presents* (I return to these later in this chapter), which Snow seems to allude to in the text of *So Is This*: "A / good / thing / about / reading / words / like / this / and / not / hearing / a / voice / is / that / you / can't / accuse / it / of / being / male / or / female."

a structure or procedure; films like *Wavelength* have surely taxed the resources of attention in many an undergraduate student. On the other hand, for those watching closely, Snow's films are full of playful distractions and rebellious gestures.[212] With only a short reach of the imagination, we can figure Snow's ←→ – the majority of which consists in the variable-speed panning back and forth of the camera fixed at the rear of a classroom – as a sustained act of disobedience situated in a space of learning. As Stephen Broomer notes, ←→'s panning may embody one of the filmmaker's characteristic puns: it seems to represent "Michael's no."[213] The boundaries described by the panning, audible as the camera hits off-frame barriers on either side of its trajectory, are marked by the primary visual reference points of a door and a window, adding the impression that the motion of the camera is considering options for a way out of the classroom. Though these seem like bits of incidental amusement, they can be recuperated into the film's ceaseless back-and-forth conceptual framework, as instances of "reaction" vis-à-vis the action of enclosing the space, of locking the spectator into the prolonged panning operation (Snow's sudden switch to an up-and-down tilt towards the end of the film is another reaction or release valve; this figurative "yes" is appropriately enough aimed at a window, although one through which a police officer briefly appears). It is important that Snow's playfully rebellious side co-exists within the same movement that aims to conduct a rigorous spatiotemporal study. That is to say, this co-existence reinforces ←→'s theme of oscillation and fusion, as brought to climax in the relativistic transformation of spatial matter into a blurred field of energy at the camera's peak panning velocity.

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[212] A sustained reading of humour in *Wavelength* is offered by David Sterritt, "Wrenching Departures: Morality and Absurdity in Avant-Garde Film," in *The Last Laugh: Strange Humors of Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 93–108.

[213] Stephen Broomer, *Codes for North: Foundations of the Canadian Avant-Garde Film* (Toronto: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 2017), 109. Snow has said, "The gesture of *Back and Forth* is a 'yes' or 'no' gesture and includes such relationships as teacher/student and male/female. The film is about reciprocities, balances, oscillations." See Mike Hoolboom, "Michael Snow [Interview]," accessed October 20, 2017, http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=112.

Structuring meets boundary-testing and -blurring in Snow's films, a dynamic tension which echoes analogously through various aspects of his work. Snow has quipped, "I like to have ecstasy and analysis. An ecstasy of analysis is an odd state allright! And an analysis of ecstasy seems a waste of good time. Or is film the only occasion for this meeting?"[214] Following this lead, a number of critics have noted a proliferation of back-and-forth interplays in Snow, between such impulses as playfulness and rigour, liberating accident and limiting control. Mellencamp draws attention to a two-sided voice in the script to *So Is This*, announcing both Snow the layman and Snow the master-author: "naïve/sardonically clever, innocent/brilliant, average guy/great artist, direct talker/tongue-in-cheek jokester."[215] For David E. James, Snow's work tends to pose "mutually ironizing antinomies," where spontaneous activities are balanced with conceptual plans.[216] One is tempted to say the duality in Snow's work occasionally has something of the comic "double act" about it: ecstasy playing foil to the straight man, analysis. However, as the fusion metaphor of ←→ suggests, it is not always easy to separate one side of Snow from the other.

For a final example of Snow's mischievous approach to educational matters, consider his limited edition 1979 artist book *High School*.[217] Printed to simulate a spiral-bound notebook one might find in a teenager's knapsack, its pages scribbled with test questions in the form of crude illustrations, juvenile puns, and head-scratching riddles, *High School* seems to convert a student's idle doodling into a wide-ranging exam that touches on subjects mathematical,

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[214] Michael Snow, "Michael Snow and Bruce Elder in Conversation," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, ed. Louise Dompierre (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 226.
[215] Mellencamp, "Receivable Texts: U.S. Avant-Garde Cinema, 1960-1980," 88.
[216] See footnote 12 in James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 245.
[217] Michael Snow, *High School* (Toronto: IWI Communications; in cooperation with the Isaacs Gallery, 1979).

linguistic, aesthetic, and libidinal.[218] The majority of the test questions contained within *High School* appear to be unanswerable from any standpoint of certainty; the impression one gets in sifting through the questions is that they are either allowing complete freedom of interpretation to the student/test-taker, or being unreasonably obscure. To select a random example from *High School*: below a drawing of a mustachioed man we read, "The man in the above illustration is eating something. What is it?"[219] Is there a correct answer here? (My best guest: pistachios.) Equally perplexing questions seem more insistent upon, if not a correct, then a sufficient way to answer. A drawing of an irregular shape comprised of several straight and rounded (phallic?) edges is stacked atop a similar shape. The student is asked to indicate ways to "repair" these shapes from a provided list of seventeen implements, including *blowtorch*, *hammer*, *tempera paint*, *determination*, *a telephone*, and *a prayer*. "Check no less than fourteen," reads the last piece of instruction.[220]

High School is an admitted curio in Snow's career that has received virtually no critical comment. This is somewhat surprising given the book's manifest relation to Snow's desire for "ecstasy of analysis" and "analysis of ecstasy." In *High School* the pleasurable play of the senses, confronted with all manner of curious shapes and diagrams, is subject to second-order questioning (here and elsewhere, Snow performs a teasing analysis of how things are represented to/in our senses, much in the manner of Magritte, whose word-image works like *Les mots et les images* [1929] seem a probable influence on *High School*[221]), while the form of this questioning, with its sometimes outrageous phrasings, is itself an immediate source of pleasure.

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[218] Snow describes the book as comprised of "stoned drawings"; hence, the title of the book is the first of many puns in *High School*. See Michael Snow, Gloria Moure, and Bruce Jenkins, *Michael Snow: Sequences: A History of His Art*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2015), 219–20.

[219] Snow, *High School*, [33].

[220] Snow, [14].

[221] For analysis of Magritte's word-image works, see Judi Freeman, "Layers of Meaning: The Multiple Readings of Dada and Surrealist Word-Images," in *The Dada & Surrealist Word-Image* (Los Angeles; Cambridge, Mass.: Los

The book also confronts us with the adolescent pitch of Snow's sexual humour, as seen in the censorship section of *So Is This* discussed above, and displayed with some frequency in Snow's films, visual art, and conceptual writings. Littered throughout *High School* are Snow's pet words like cock, cunt, and fuck ("cock" over "cunt" is made to equal "fuck" in one choice mathematical equation), as well as drawings of naked women, genitalia both male and female, and two sets of open lips waiting to receive, respectively, a breast and an erect penis. The front, left half of a woman's naked profile is presented; the student is asked to complete the "right side" of the drawing, then to answer "which is the wrong side?"[222] Snow's approach to sex is usually crude; see, for example, his early essay "Something You Might Try," which describes hetero-sexual intercourse in utterly naïve terms, as if from the perspective of a neophyte lacking any familiarity with the most elementary sexual vocabulary.[223] Snow has claimed to think "basically" when it comes to aesthetic concepts[224] – that is, he begins with a concern for shape, form, presentation per se – and rather obviously this extends to his figuration of sex. In *High School*, the analysis of ecstasy assumes a further meaning, with Snow's naïve libido deployed as an excuse to treat sex as an abstract aesthetic problem. To speculate on what amuses or titillates Snow about this abstraction of sex, we could give the reason that sex crudely reduces to shape (namely, the shape of sexual organs), while inevitably hinting at the ejaculatory excess latent in this shape. Again, it becomes difficult to disentangle the twin impulses in Snow: the crudely figured sexuality is at once a juvenile, edging into sexist, fantasy, as well as a philosophical

Angeles County Museum of Art; MIT Press, 1989), 13–55. Snow directly cites Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* (or *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) (1928-29) in the text of *So Is This*. For comments on Snow in relation to Magritte, and more particularly for a discussion of the other major influence on Snow's thinking around language – Wittgenstein (whom we'll return to below) – see Justin Remes, "Boundless Ontologies: Michael Snow, Wittgenstein, and the Textual Film," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (2015): 69–87.
[222] Snow, [12].
[223] Michael Snow, "Something You Might Try," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, ed. Louise Dompierre (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 10–12.
[224] Snow quoted in Peter Lehman, "The Nature of the Material: An Interview with Michael Snow," *Wide Angle* 7, no. 1 & 2 (1985): 93.

abstraction. Meanwhile any thoughts of orgasmic release spurred by this crude figuration of sex

can be considered the product of both garden-variety arousal and an aesthetic insight into the

dramatic tensions contained by form. In a sense, what we are dealing with is a classic case of

avant-garde irreverence – perhaps a staging of what Snow, with tongue in cheek, once referred to

as Marcel Duchamp's "wonderful hetero intellectual smut."[225]

There is obviously much to unpack here, and in order not to take this chapter in an

entirely different (though not unimportant) direction, I will limit myself to a few brief remarks on

the issue of Snow's "smut," or his jokey handling of sex. What can we mean by "smut" in the

context of humour? Sigmund Freud describes the "smutty" joke as a relation of sexual exposure

involving three parties: the first party is the joke teller, who makes an allusive joke of aggressive

sexual desires involving a second party, the object of the joke (in Freud's examples, the object of

the smutty joke is paradigmatically a woman); the sexual desires in the smutty joke are staged for

the pleasure of a third party, the listener or audience. Smut can be thought as a way of exposing

sexual desire not in order to attract the object of that sexual desire (Freud conceives smuttiness as

a way of channeling hostility when desire is met with an obstacle, namely, women's "incapacity

to tolerate undisguised sexuality"), but rather to appeal to an audience who will find amusement

and release in the fact that base obscenities have been made public through joking.[226]

An example of what Snow describes as Duchamp's "wonderful hetero intellectual smut"

may be *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), a commercial reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* over which Duchamp,

like a cheeky schoolboy, has doodled a beard and mustache. Below the picture are written the

letters L.H.O.O.Q., which we can read in phonetic French as "Elle a chaud au cul" – translated to

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[225] Michael Snow, "Admission (or, Marcel Duchamp)," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, ed. Louise Dompierre (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 288.

[226] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud -- Volume VIII (1905): Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1960), 97–102.

English: "She is hot in the ass." These letters can, of course, also be read together as a homonym

for the English verb *look*.[227] We can arguably detect the influence of such smut in Snow's film

Presents, with its infamous use of sexualized images of women as punning objects that "present"

themselves to the gaze of the camera; and in Snow's 1986 photo spread entitled *Repeat Offender*,

which consists of Xeroxed pages of a pornographic centerfold from *Penthouse* magazine.[228]

Works such as these have earned Snow charges of sexism.[229] In her psychoanalytic-feminist

reading of *Presents*, Teresa de Lauretis asserts that Snow's film, "in setting up the problematic of

the [cinematic] apparatus, does demonstrate the relations and the terms of its vision including,

above all, the woman as object, ground and support of the representation."[230] However, this

demonstration remains bound to the typical "subject-object, man-woman dichotomy" of looking

and identification found in classical narrative cinema; thus, it is the body of woman as image

which is inscribed in *Presents* with the "impossible effort" to satisfy the desire of the masculine

spectator-subject(-author), including the desire for meaning in its wholeness or plenitude. As I

discuss below the recurrence of "containers" and of "plenitude" (and its maintenance and

continuation of desire) in Snow's films, it is worth keeping in mind de Lauretis' remarks, and

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[227] Susan Rubin Suleiman offers an alternative Freudian reading of *L.H.O.O.Q.* that complicates the reading of "smut" into the work: "The graffiti-mustache and the beard and the scurrilous pun all point to an infantile persona for the signatory to this work—as does the bilingual pun on 'LOOK,' which suggests the antics of a little boy wanting to be seen performing by (usually) his mother. Here is a case, then, of a classic Oedipal scenario in its 'ascendant' phase: the son, counting on the complicity of his mother, declares his rebellion against the name—and the law—of the father." Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 152.

[228] Michael Snow, "Repeat Offender," *Photo Communique* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 22–29.

[229] For two complaints against the sexism, and the "intellectual bullshit" which props it up, in *Repeat Offender* see Shonagh Adelman and Peggy Kelly, "Exchange [Letters to Editor]," *Photo Communique* 8, no. 4 (Winter /1987 1986): 2. For Snow's lengthy, at times mocking, reply to these letters, see Michael Snow, "Exchange [Letters to Peggy Kelly and Shonagh Adelman]," *Photo Communique* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 3, 42–44.

[230] Teresa De Lauretis, "Snow on the Oedipal Stage," *Screen* 22, no. 3 (September 1981): 31. *Presents* is also critiqued on feminist grounds in Amy Taubin, "Tracks in Snow," *The Soho News*, April 22, 1981

asking how the "drama" (or in our case, comedy) of "oppositions" in Snow is more than an aesthetic preoccupation, but also – in its specific inscriptions – carries "ideological weight."[231]

In Chapter 2, I look at examples of feminist video art that derive different kinds of humorous pleasure from the bodies of women. Performance videos by such artists as Susan Mogul and Martha Rosler engage satirically, critically, with stereotypes around how women should alternately contain and display their bodies. The forms of excess and release in these videos are, then, explicitly personal and political in their meanings and pleasures, where an artist like Michael Snow may wish to keep even his messier exploits sanitized of politics. There is always the aesthetic-abstract alibi to return to.

It is worth remembering here, after Shana MacDonald, that the period of critical ascendancy for structural film exhibited, whether as a result of critic or filmmaker investments, a "discursive veiling of the body" in avant-garde cinema.[232] By emphasizing the body in their work, writes MacDonald, many women filmmakers were marginalized, if not completely excluded, from the leading critical histories of the time. This critical antagonism is memorialized in Carolee Schneemann's performance piece *Interior Scroll* (first performed in 1975). At the most infamous point in the piece, Schneemann unfurls a long paper scroll out of her vagina, and reads a text that, among other things, describes Schneemann's encounter with "a structuralist filmmaker" who condescends to liking Schneemann as a friend, but cannot bear to watch her films. To wit, "there are certain films / we cannot look at: / the personal clutter / the persistence of feelings / the hand-touch sensibility / the diaristic indulgence / the painterly mess / the dense gestalt / the primitive techniques." On the other hand, Schneemann is told that she has no capacity for structuralist genius: "you are unable to / appreciate the system, the grid / the

[231] De Lauretis, 36.
[232] Shana Danielle Elizabeth MacDonald, "Between Frames: Feminist Experimental Media 1960-2010" (Dissertation, York University, 2013), 16.

numerical rational procedures – the Pythagorean / cues." Schneemann later explained that this text was a response, not to a filmmaker, but to critic Annette Michelson, one of the major backers of structural film, who once requested to watch Schneemann's films and then proceeded to sleep through them.[233]

To restate, this chapter challenges any notion of Michael Snow as a dryly systematic filmmaker. His work, by all appearances, does not belong in a conception of structural film that would eliminate the body as a site of investigation and pleasure. But this is not to say that Snow's treatment of the body doesn't raise its own issues. One has to wonder about Snow's smut, and consider the feminist critiques that his work has attracted. A fuller discussion of this matter would, I think, do well to reflect on Snow's documented engagements with feminist theory in the 70s and 80s; this is yet another "academic context" with which his work seems to enter an, at times, sarcastic dialogue.

One should also guard against a too-easy identification with the fore-example of Duchamp. Snow's smut cannot retain the typical alibi granted to the jokey-erotic gestures conducted by Duchamp in a high art context – that is, the alibi of the historical avant-garde function, to *épater le bourgeois*. As many art historians have argued, shocking bourgeois taste in this way is hardly a tenable avant-garde strategy in the latter half of the twentieth century, when the activities of the Dadaists and Surrealists come to be embraced by official art world institutions.[234] Besides this, the gender-play of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, and more pointedly that

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[233] Schneemann borrowed her insults – "the hand-touch sensibility / the diaristic indulgence" – from an encounter with some of Michelson's students, who were attempting to justify their teacher's snoozing indifference. See Scott MacDonald, "Carolee Schneemann [Interview]," in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 143–44.

[234] This is by no means a settled topic of debate. Călinescu notes that "Barthes is one of the first to speak of the death of the avant-garde: it was dying because it was recognized as artistically significant by the same class whose values it so drastically rejected." Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), 120. Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* announces the defeat of the avant-garde project at the point when "the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the

of his alter-ego "Rrose Sélavy," is but one aspect of Duchamp that offers his work up to queer readings.[235] As Amelia Jones has argued, there is an ambiguity to Duchamp's gendering and eroticism that remains productive and challenging, that has seen his work made available to masculinist lineages, but also to feminist re-interpretations.[236] By comparison, how should we measure the achievement of Snow's vulgar disruptions, his humorous revolts against the idea of structure or containment?

I leave this line of inquiry for the time being, fraught and incomplete. In the next sections, I resume my previous discussion of the comic impulses in Snow, considering how these impulses map onto Snow's other film work.

BURSTING CONTAINERS

Breakfast (Table Top Dolly) (1976) is one of Snow's least examined films. It is a crowd-pleasing but not overly complex work. We open on a table of breakfast items – eggs, bread, milk, fruit – spread out in familiar still-life fashion. Offscreen we hear the sound of dishes being washed, and a radio. The camera slowly advances on the still life; we suddenly remember the obdurate zoom in *Wavelength*, and detect a note of deflationary self-parody. However, it becomes clear that the movement is not a zoom but a dolly, as the items begin to be pushed by a hidden sheet of plexiglass mounted to the front of the camera. Some items roll off the sides of

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avant-garde as an art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions" – the latter being, in Bürger's formulation, to sublate art by organizing from it a new life praxis. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 58. Contra Bürger, Hal Foster argues that "the becoming-institutional of the avant-garde does not doom all art thereafter to so much affectation and/or entertainment. It prompts in a *second* neo-avant-garde a critique of this process of acculturation and/or accommodation." Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 24. For a reading of Dada "shock" beyond the *épater le bourgeois* paradigm, as well as an argument for the revisioning and re-functioning of this "shock" in Fluxus, see Dorothée Brill, *Shock and the Senseless in Dada and Fluxus* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 159.

[235] See, for example, Paul B. Franklin, "Object Choice: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and the Art of Queer Art History," *Oxford Art Journal* 23, no. 1 (2000): 23–50.

[236] Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

the table, while others not so lucky continue to be pressed towards the table's far end, where nothing awaits but a blank wall and the final pancaking of this breakfast. Tension mounts over the fate of two eggs nested in the foreground of the composition. (Whoever's cleaning the dishes will soon have another mess on their hands.) Fifteen minutes of this dolly-in and Snow has achieved the "two-dimensionalizing" effect of photography he is so fond of demonstrating in his art, this time through the physical force of his camera instead of the more conceptual use of photograph that finishes *Wavelength*'s journey into deep space. The breakfast is pinned to the wall, the still life become impromptu junk collage. For an encore, Snow twice pulls the camera in reverse and rams (so as to *break fast*?) the pile of groceries, streaking juices across the table.

In its crushed milk carton, cracked eggs, *Breakfast* offers the most literal instances of a repeating figure of humour in Snow's films, what we can call the bursting container. The advancing plexiglass dolly is another container, though its bursting is a verb not an adjective. Snow's work compulsively stages the primacy of shape, only to test the points at which it seeps, smears, and breaks. The zoom-container of *Wavelength*, abetted by the rising electronic sine wave on the soundtrack and the tightening of the frame, builds in pressurization until it reaches the photograph of ocean waves tacked to the wall.[237] At this point of liquid climax, suggests Snow, the film "cums."[238] In a less vulgar sense, we can think of the ocean picture as intimating

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[237] In Elizabeth's Legge's reading, "The narrowing zoom and rising sine wave in *Wavelength* can be felt as compressing and intensifying, in an analogue to seeing as a movement into the *depths* of 'visibility' – as if seeing were analogous to entering space as a liquid pressurised medium." Elizabeth Legge, *Michael Snow: Wavelength* (London: Afterall Books, 2009), 48.

[238] Quoted in Scott MacDonald, "Michael Snow [Interview]," in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 57. Snow has also quipped that *Wavelength*'s forty-six minutes are the length of a "[n]ice fuck." Michael Snow, "Ten Questions to Michael Snow," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, ed. Louise Dompierre (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 51. From Snow's archives Kenneth White has recovered a number of discarded plans to foreground the sexual(/sexist) metaphor of *Wavelength*, including the use of a photograph of a woman's spread-apart legs instead of waves at film's end, and the following alternate titles for the film: "Cunt-Room," "The Cuntempla[tion] Room," "Wet Room Time," "Thy ['Thigh'] Length," "Amy's Entrance," and "The Throat." Kenneth White, "Strangeloves: From/De La Région Centrale, Air Defense Radar Station Moisie, and Media Cultures of the Cold War," *Grey Room* 58 (Winter 2015): 69.

the paradox of a terminal point of focus and stillness, which nonetheless "opens" the loft setting onto an image of the boundless. Snow's decision to fill the container with human business – in dispersed sequence: a shelf being moved, a pair of friends listening to the radio, a man dropping dead, a woman placing a call to "Richard" to report the dead body in the room – as well as time-eliding passages of day and night, and other instances of what Juan A. Suárez identifies as exfoliating "noise" in the film,[239] give further indication that a wider "outside" is spilling into and out of the zoom, rather than simply being confined by its boundaries.[240]

Snow has spoken of the chancier elements in his predetermined structures: "Oppositions are drama. I didn't always make a 'choice.' Just felt like it or else just did it. I was surprised and I wanted to be. However I set up a system or container which could both shape the fortuitous and give it a place . . . who knows?"[241] He is adamant that his work should not be thought of as "conceptual," if by that one means "you have this idea and that it just gets done."[242] By making a real object of the conceptual, by bringing a predetermined container into existence, Snow anticipates there will be accidents, and embraces their inevitability. In fact, one could say that an element of planning goes into the fortuitous slippages one encounters in his filmic containers (cf.

Breakfast (Table Top Dolly) appears to continue the sexual metaphor of *Wavelength*, though here it may be a mere accident that a rising banana combines with two eggs to form a complete phallic composition as the camera pushes in. It seems worth noting that the push-in ceases at the point when the two eggs break, hence, on the ejaculatory note that concludes *Wavelength*. The film's subtitle, *(Table Top Dolly)*, seems to realize the sexist ambitions of Snow's alternate titles for *Wavelength*.

[239] Suárez, "Structural Film: Noise," 77–78.

[240] This would seem to go against Snow's official "statement" on *Wavelength*, which evokes the metaphysical theme of the "beauty and sadness of equivalence"; all objects and events in the film are made "cosmically equivalent" by the film's zooming action. Michael Snow, "A Statement on 'Wavelength' for the Experimental Film Festival of Knokke-Le-Zoute," *Film Culture* 46 (Autumn 1967): 1. It is perhaps only with the hindsight afforded by Snow's future works that I can claim the "outside" spilling into *Wavelength* ironically counterpoints instead of merely reinstates the zoom's equalizing action. *Breakfast*, for example, quite literally demonstrates the spillage that happens when the frame attempts to flatten all objects into one.

[241] Snow, *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, 46.

[242] Quoted in Donato Totaro and André Habib, "Weathering the Creative Storm: An Interview with Michael Snow," *Offscreen* 6, no. 11 (November 2002), https://offscreen.com/view/michael_snow1.

Duchamp's notion of "canned chance"[243]); the fixed contours of Snow's containers, cast in time's change and contingency, seem bound to suffer contradictions.

Consider again the sheer volume of meanings Snow pours into his deictic-container in *So Is This*. At various junctures in the film, "this" can mean nothing but itself, and whatever else might be nearby – in a sentence, in a temporal or spatial situation – to assign it reference. When you get right down to it, "This / is / a / universe!" As Snow helpfully explains,

> since ["this"] is so present-tense, it means that every projection of this film is going to be now – there – what's there – this. So, it's absolutely self-referential, and even in that case, "this" refers to the word "this," but it also refers to the screen, and it refers to the light and quite a number of things that are there. Around that present tense situation there are a number of future and conditional situations that are set up: what will happen, what could happen, and what might happen, as well as a lot of past tenses, the same sort of way there is a ring of possible audiences around it too.[244]

Which is to say that Snow's film is a film about itself – a self-container – that also, by way of this (or rather, *This*), ineluctably opens itself to a roving contextualization (*This* is this, but also that, there), fulfilling an anxious audience's desire "to / read / about / a / way / out" . . . "Whoops! / Perhaps / this / shouldn't / have / mentioned / a / 'way / out!'"

Snow's *Presents* multiplies the figure of the bursting container. The film divides into roughly four discernible containers. The first is a video image, manipulated through the use of a synthesizer, that begins as a long vertical stripe in the centre of the screen, which slowly stretches in width, while narrowing in height, to reveal a thumbnail image of a reclining nude woman in a bedroom; the image continues to get wider and shorter until it cuts across the screen as a horizontal stripe; this stripe then opens vertically to reveal the nude model in full frame. Matching this we hear a soundtrack of an electronic chord whose notes gradually modulate so

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[243] See Pierre Cabanne and Marcel Duchamp, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 47.
[244] Michael Snow, "Present Tense Situation: Michael Snow Comments on So Is This," in *Words & Moving Images: Essays on Verbal and Visual Expression in Film and Television*, ed. William C. Wees and Michael Dorland (Montréal, Québec: Médiatexte Publications, 1984), 24.

they are symmetrically inverted, the highest note resolving to the lowest, and vice versa. Here we have an early example of Snow's fascination with the anamorphic possibilities of video synthesization, which will receive their fullest expression in the Silly Putty-like contortions of the human body and the picture frame in Snow's digital opus *Corpus Callosum*.[245]

The second container in *Presents* is introduced when we cut from the opening video image to an image of the same reclining woman represented on film. A drum-like beat alerts her to the presence of someone at her apartment door, and the woman quickly rises to put on her housecoat and travel screen-right of the cross-sectioned apartment set, through a main living space, to answer the door. As she begins towards the door, we hear an offscreen voice call out, "One!" and the loud noise of an unseen truck moving the set by forklift; this converts the set into a treadmill which the woman must pretend to saunter across, her ceiling lamp swaying, while the camera remains fixed. There is a man at the door carrying flowers, a beau. From here the scene continues to be acted out: she places the flowers in a bedroom vase, and turns on a vinyl record of Bach; they search the apartment for a mysterious document; all the while the set is trucked this way and that according to numbered instructions shouted offscreen. A veritable slapstick scene emerges from the destabilizing effects of the mobile set-container as it increases in speed and rate of course correction – the record constantly skips, papers go flying, a houseplant keels over, the actors wobble and struggle to keep their balance. "One of the reasons for moving the set was to get everything into the act," Snow has explained[246]; this recalls silent comedy's

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[245] For a delightful essay on anamorphosis in Snow, see Stéfani de Loppinot, "Depraved Perspectives: The Cinema of Michael Snow," in *Solo Snow: œuvres de Michael Snow*, ed. Louise Déry (Tourcoing [France]; Montréal: Le Fresnoy; Galerie de l'UQAM, 2011), 48–57.

[246] Quoted in Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The 'Presents' of Michael Snow," *Film Comment* 17, no. 3 (June 1981): 37. Rosenbaum compares the set of *Presents* to the total activation of household props in Charlie Chaplin's *One A.M.* (1916). See also Erik Bullot's likening of *Presents* to Buster Keaton's *One Week* (1920). Erik Bullot, "Keaton and Snow," trans. Molly Stevens, *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 24.

attempts to wring laughs from the sheer number of things being animated, put into motion.[247]

Snow has left all the heavy lifting of screen movement to the mise-en-scène rather than the

camera (the apartment in a more literal sense "shows" or presents itself to the camera),[248]

approximating in real space the merely figurative deformations of the image rendered by the

pans in ←→, much as *Breakfast* enacts the brute force of two-dimensionality existing only as a

conceptual feint in *Wavelength*. In either case the conceptual is parodied by the physical, which

further suggests a parody of the anti-illusionary hang-up of structuralism to "represent

representing."[249]

　　　The third container of *Presents* heralds the return of the camera-mounted plexiglass from

Breakfast for another round of destruction. The apartment set is forklifted forward and tilted

downward (to simulate a track or zoom in), and Snow's camera, attached to a motorized dolly

driven by Snow, travels up a ramp onto – or into – the set. The plexiglass mount (Snow has

referred to it as his "snow plow"[250]) announces its presence by immediately pressing against a

tabletop and popping it end-up, startling the actors seated there, who quickly scramble to safety.

Snow (who is occasionally visible in the plexiglass' reflection, wearing a balaclava) continues

his tour through the set, squeezing the table into a couch, cramming away at a desk in the corner,

bumping into the woman's rear end, knocking a TV off its stand, and ripping a whole in the wall,

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[247] See, for example, Michael North's claim that "Edison could advertise his [company's film] *Visit to the Spiritualist* as 'the funniest of all moving films' because it put so much in motion." Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

[248] In a grant proposal for *Presents*, Snow calls this "a simple and perhaps seemingly silly reversal of the by-now standard (in conventional films) invisible camera movements. A small aspect of the effect will be the no doubt sometimes comic jarring of ingrained expected sensation." Michael Snow Fonds, box 1, file 10, Art Gallery of Ontario, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Toronto, Ontario.

[249] Looking at his visual art, Elizabeth Legge writes of Snow's tendency to parody minimalism and conceptualism, so that we find, for instance, in a photographic work like Snow's *Red⁵* (1974), "[not] the Minimalists' insistence on colour and shape in themselves, as purely perceptual experiences, but rather a picture of what such an insistence might look like." Elizabeth Legge, "Taking as Red: Michael Snow and Wittgenstein," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 18, no. 2 (1997): 84.

[250] Snow uses this pun in his grant proposal for *Presents*. Michael Snow Fonds, box 1, file 10, Art Gallery of Ontario, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Toronto, Ontario.

the camera apparatus all the while letting off screeching noises (Teresa de Lauretis likens these noises to the screams of the space creature in *Alien* [1979][251]). Eventually, the image of the apartment wall itself collapses as Snow optically transitions to the fourth and final container of the film, a set of some 2000 brief handheld shots captured during Snow's world travels, organized around the theme of "presenting" and punctuated at the point of each cut by the same percussive noise we heard when the opening video image cut to film. In this final section of the film we are no longer dealing with a container as a more or less definable shape, with discernible physical boundaries (though there is some consistency to the handheld tracking movements of the shots); rather what we have in this final section is a container as a thematic ordering principle. I would argue this "presenting" montage leads us to a corollary concern in Snow, an inventorying impulse, which requires that we broaden our concept of how the comic operates through his films.

THE COMEDY OF THE COPIOUS INVENTORY

Acutely amusing as Snow's films can be, to get the full picture of what I believe is the comic orientation in much of his work, we need a notion of "comedy" that does not limit its interest to finite moments of humour, with their inducements to laughter. Robert S. Dupree writes of the tendency in literary studies to figure comedy as primarily "concerned with constraint – with manners, categories, structures, and organization," a relatively recent conception that ignores aspects of the longer history of the genre.[252] The structural films I have thus far examined may satisfy this popular conception of the "comedy of manners," insofar as we can locate moments where they point to the futility and contradictions in our habits of ordering,

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[251] Teresa De Lauretis, "Snow on the Oedipal Stage," *Screen* 22, no. 3 (September 1981): 27.
[252] Dupree, "The Copious Inventory of Comedy," 163.

often with biting reference to the social world. However, I would suggest a simultaneous impulse in certain structural films moves them in the direction of an older form of comedy, resurrected in some areas of literary modernism: what Dupree calls the comedy of the "copious inventory."

Dupree writes, "If there were a rhetoric of comedy – and surely there should be – its main figure would have to be copia, the theme of plenitude and abundance."[253] This is the tradition reintroduced by Mikhail Bakhtin in his landmark study on "Renaissance laughter"; we find Rabelais' *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* chockfull of breathless and grotesque lists, genealogies, word jumbles – celebrations of the ridiculous ad infinitum. If tragedy represents the "geometrically certain" fate cast upon us by a cold, inflexible universe, comedy of the copious takes heart from the idea that life's variety is endless and unknowable.[254] "For comedy is not about knowledge but about change. It is about the uncertainty and strange directionless world that so capriciously satisfies or thwarts our expectations. Comedy is the dwelling in a teleological vacuum that can only be filled by human presence and human labors."[255] This sense of "dwelling" is crucial; the comic state of mind feels "imaginatively" at home in uncertainty, incompletion, abundance.[256] The comic poet is one who realizes that, once they have begun to inventory, there is nothing telling them to stop. Even as copious inventories assume an ordering principle, at the same time they "manifest a universe that is laden, despite rules and regulations, with more matter and spirit than any individual or society can contain."[257]

While Dupree observes the comic inventory has resurfaced in literary modernism – key examples are found in Joyce, Beckett, and Borges[258] – he argues that its meaning has changed,

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[253] Dupree, 163.
[254] Dupree, 169.
[255] Dupree, 170.
[256] Dupree, 169.
[257] Dupree, 163–64.
[258] See also Foucault's preface to *The Order of Things*, which opens with an account of the author's laughter at a passage from Borges quoting the classification of animals in a "certain Chinese encyclopaedia": "animals are

that something in the way of hope has gone out of it. In Rabelais' age, copiousness could be a pointer to the community, to the feeling of a lived and shareable plenitude, to what Bakhtin called the carnivalesque, with its ties in both the sacred and the profane. This copiousness was a sign of creative joy and inspired wonder at the mysterious innumerability of things. When we encounter "inventorial exuberance" in the modern world, argues Dupree, it often takes the form of "meaninglessness and the irrationality of dreams," as in Surrealism and the comedy of the absurd.[259] Dupree posits that scientific method has done its part to force this absurd position, modelling a world in which classifying and cataloguing are ends in themselves, substituting for live experience. It can hardly be helped, then, if we feel a paralyzing and isolating "emptiness" amidst the comic inventories of the modern, where once there was communal fullness.

For R. Bruce Elder, the films of Michael Snow have a "tragic" character.[260] In making this claim Elder draws upon a comment by Snow: "It can seem sad that in order to exist a form must have bounds, limits, set and setting."[261] Seen this way, the "containers" in Snow's films are formal circumscriptions that bespeak the sadness of all that is "lost" in the act of giving form. Elder points to the heavy sense of loss in Snow's film *See You Later/Au revoir* (1990), a

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divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies." Foucault uses this passage to reflect on the problem, or rather the laughable "monstrosity," of a vanished common ground where such things could possibly be ordered in the way they are. "The central category of animals 'included in the present classification', with its explicit reference to paradoxes we are familiar with, is indication enough that we shall never succeed in defining a stable relation of contained to container between each of these categories and that which includes them all: if all the animals divided up here can be placed without exception in one of the divisions of this list, then aren't all the other divisions to be found in that one division too? And then again, in what space would that single, inclusive division have its existence? Absurdity destroys the *and* of the enumeration by making impossible the *in* where the things enumerated would be divided up." Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Tavistock Publications (London; New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), xvi, xviii.

[259] Dupree, "The Copious Inventory of Comedy," 189.
[260] R. Bruce Elder, "Michael Snow's Presence," in *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow, 1956-1991*, ed. Jim Shedden (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1995), 134.
[261] Quoted in Elder, 95. Cf. Dupree's remark that modern artists like Piet Mondrian saw "tragedy" in representationalism, and thus sought abstract forms all their own. "Abstraction in art—from Kandinsky on often identified with the 'spiritual' and the soul—appealed to [Mondrian's] generation as a means of discovering a harmony and equilibrium that nature cannot provide." Dupree, "The Copious Inventory of Comedy," 189.

performance of a brief farewell in an office between Snow and wife Peggy Gale, played back in eighteen-minute super slow-motion.[262] In the elongated moment, each gesture – Snow throwing on his overcoat; turning to say goodbye to Gale as his shadow falls across her; exiting at last through a doorway – takes on a concrete shape and inevitability; the images as transformed are both final and vanishing. The farewell is, per Snow's synopsis for the film, "formally complete." Knowing the personal aspect of this husband-and-wife encounter clinches the pathos of its fateful, and therefore tragically ironic, "see you later."

I would not stretch the tragic reading of Snow too far. As previously argued, for every "geometrical certainty" in Snow there is an act of reconfiguration, limit pushing, and spillover. Does this imply the proper reading of Snow is, in typical oscillating fashion, *tragicomic*? Perhaps not if one is willing, as I believe Snow compulsively is, to replace the "loss" of form-giving with a perceptible "excess" that assures a single form can never contain all – which means that one has not lost but gained something in the bargain, inasmuch as creativity sustains itself through perpetual making and undoing.

Interestingly, the term "tragicomic" enters Snow's vocabulary when he speaks about the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Snow remarks that Wittgenstein's book *On Certainty* is "very tragi-comic," telling an interviewer, "It's really a riot. It's really very funny. It's about how impossible it is to be certain."[263] Snow proceeds to say that the amusing qualities of Wittgenstein's philosophy informed the making of Snow's epic "sound comedy," *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen*. This is a film in which the sound-image relation of film acts as the container or ordering principle of Snow's investigation;

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262 Elder, "Michael Snow's Presence," 115–18.
263 Snow, *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, 85. Snow has also cited the influence on *Rameau's Nephew* of Wittgenstein's posthumous book, *Zettel*. See Justin Remes, "Sculpting Time: An Interview with Michael Snow," *Millennium Film Journal* 56 (Fall 2012): 21.

Snow puts this relation through twenty-five distinct variations, and one gets the impression he

doesn't get very far in exhausting the possibilities. Rather than being an instance of the

tragicomic, with its accent of hopelessness, I would suggest *Rameau's Nephew* gives the amplest

evidence in Snow's work for the comedy of plenitude and copious inventory, as outlined by

Dupree. While it seems Snow turns away from primary shape in this episodic, shaggy film, and

thus leaves behind one of the core concerns of his previous work, what Snow in effect does with

Rameau's Nephew is convert a bursting container into its over-evolved counterpart, the copious

inventory. Further, I would amend Dupree's claim that modern times have transformed the

copious inventory into a comedy of the absurd or the banal, for it can be argued with Snow that

utopianism, not dark comic futility, can still be the creative engine behind the foolish attempt to

carry on and on with one's cataloguing. Before coming to a discussion of *Rameau's Nephew*,

however, I will first locate this copious orientation in the work and thought of the structural film

movement in which Snow's work has been situated.

LAST FILMS AND ENCYCLOPEDIAS

> If we are indeed doomed to the comically convergent task of dismantling the universe,
> and fabricating from its stuff an artifact called *'The Universe,'* it is reasonable to suppose
> that such an artifact will resemble the vaults of an endless film archive built to house, in
> eternal cold storage, the *infinite film*.
> – Hollis Frampton, "For a Metahistory of Film"[264]

In his painstaking analysis of structural film, David E. James corrects the perception that

the dominant aesthetic character of this "genre" is minimalist. No doubt there are many films that

conform to simple structures with simple contents, as though to demonstrate a solitary aspect of

the film process. We might call these "first films," after Michael Snow's description of Ernie

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[264] Hollis Frampton, "For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses," in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins, The MIT Press Writing Art Series (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 137.

Gehr's *History* (1970), which draws close attention to the fact of film grain. But equally are there

structural films, such as Snow's, in which apparently simplified structure "is merely the clearing

away of debris that impedes perception of complex operations which otherwise would go

unnoticed." In these films, "[t]he minimal always implies its opposite and complement, the

encyclopedic."[265] The products of this operation, says James, can be considered "last films."[266]

James aligns the encyclopedic impulse in structural film with a presiding "urge to

complete the set of all possible effects in a limited number of parameters."[267] Paul Sharits'

Analytic Studies (1972-76), to use one of James' examples, seem to aspire to permutational

completeness, while Snow's *Rameau's Nephew* seems to strive for the exhaustion of possible

"sound-image" relations (whether the film meets this goal is, I think much to the purpose,

impossible to determine). Another example might be Joyce Wieland's *Reason Over Passion*

(1969), which depicts an apparent (though only apparent) cross-country road trip of Canada

while cycling through superimposed anagrammatic variations on the title of the film. R. Bruce

Elder affords us a different entry point into this variational dynamic, by reference to Hugh

Kenner's idea of "Art in a Closed Field," in which "poets and novelists of the modern era [and

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[265] James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 244–45.
[266] James, 252.
    There is another sense in which filmmakers attempted to create "last films," namely by hastening the "endgame" of certain logics within structural film. Disheartened by the "structuralist hegemony" that had gripped experimental film in the 1970s, and convinced that this had mired up-and-coming filmmakers in embarrassingly passé formalist concerns which the larger art world had long since moved past, Tony Conrad aimed to "accelerate" the progressive logic of formalism to the stage of "dematerialization," therefore bringing an end to the structuralist stage. If self-fashioned structural filmmakers were hung up on elaborating "duration" in various cinematic guises, to tedious extents, then Conrad would go to the extreme of constructing a work of "cinema" scaled to the measure of a "human lifetime." Hence, Conrad's *Yellow Movie Series* (1972-76), which used as its "light recording mechanism" cheap yellow paint applied to a screen-shaped canvas; the paint would inevitably fade with the indefinite passage of time, thus making a "cinematic" record of unsurpassable duration. Conrad's "checkmate in the 'structural' film game," however, was his *Articulation of Boolean Algebra for Film Materials* (1975), a self-consciously "encyclopedic" work composed of six stripes printed on the film strip in a dense algorithmic structure, scaled to correspond to "screen design, flicker, tone, rhythm, and meter, all with octave relationships." Again, for Conrad, these endgames were a way to relieve experimental film of its modernist deadlock and bring it up to speed with concerns that mattered to Conrad and his ilk in the art world, namely, forms of institutional critique. Conrad, "Is This Penny Ante or a High Stakes Game? An Interventionist Approach to Experimental Filmmaking," 104–6.
[267] James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 253.

here we might say filmmakers] redefine the boundaries of their respective practices by selecting

specific elements from the medium with which they work . . . and ordering them according to

laws or rules of their own devising."[268] Once one chooses the rule or system with which to

enclose and exhaustively organize a finite set of materials, one approaches the modernist dream

of a total work.

Of course, when the encyclopedic becomes a prime motivator, there is no stopping one

from widening the parameters of one's system, until what results is Frampton's "comically

convergent task" of reconstructing *"The Universe"* by means of the storehouse of the *"infinite*

film." Not surprisingly, Frampton is James' paradigmatic case of the encyclopedically inclined

filmmaker. Frampton's hugely ambitious, incomplete film cycle *Magellan* was, in its preparatory

phases, set to encircle the following conceptual terrain:

> The notion of a hypothetical, totally inclusive work of film art as a model for human
> consciousness. I propose a work of art (not a scientific or philosophical theory) that shall
> touch upon a sufficient number of shores to cartoon my own affective world. We may
> assume that each thing implies the universe, whose most obvious trait is its complexity;
> on that principle, I conceive, distantly, of an art of cinema that might encode thought as
> compactly as the human genetic substance encodes our entire physical body.[269]

Yet, this scarcely begins to outline the prospective compass of *Magellan*. For instance, a portion

of the proposed fourth section of the cycle, *Straits of Magellan*, was to include "an homage to

film's very beginnings, the protocinema of the brothers Lumière; and then, an encyclopedia of

modalities of perception . . . deliberate, as the Lumière's inventory probably was not."[270] One

could go on describing Frampton's shifting plans for achieving a "grammatically complete

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[268] R. Bruce Elder, "A Radical Sense of Form: Against Organic Unity, or Notes for Discussion of Broomer's Films," in *The Transformable Moment: The Films of Stephen Broomer*, ed. Tom McSorley and Scott Birdwise (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 2014), 23.

[269] Hollis Frampton, "Statement of Plans for *Magellan*," in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins, The MIT Press Writing Art Series (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 228.

[270] Frampton, 229.

synopsis" of the infinite film, or, a grand "metahistory" of film." What interests us here is

Frampton's belief in the overriding "comical" nature of the *Magellan* enterprise.

In an interview given in 1980, upon the screening of completed sections of his cycle,

Frampton confesses he is trying to make a "comedy" with the work-in-progress *Magellan*. How

this could be the case is not easily explained:

> I think there are two observations to be made: one is that after all this time, in film or outside, while we have a set of general theories of tragic art, we do not have a general theory of comedy. Period. My own claim is to suggest that—aside from the occasional joke, or giggle or guffaw, or that special gratification that can come at the moment when one perceives that a from has fulfilled itself—comic art resolves in favor of its protagonist. Now, the manner in which it does that can be very, very complicated. . . . But, if you wish to accept my general axiom, that brings on a second question, and I think that in the case of this film it's possibly a paramount question. And that is, of course, to find the identity of the protagonist, since there is none, you see. If you look for a persona of the Renaissance explorer within the film, you are not going to find it. If you seek that at the center, the center will be empty.[271]

Frampton proposes to resolve this absent centre by suggesting that, first, he, the artist, is the

"surrogate protagonist" of the cycle at the stage of its making; then, the audience takes over as

protagonist when the work is done. Thus, despite the daunting complexity of *Magellan*, the

spectator may eventually assume the place of protagonist of the work, and experience the cycle

resolving in their favour. Frampton admits there is something "utopian" in this idea, as it calls

upon an intensely "active" relation of the spectator to the work, that is, it "posits for the spectator

a kind of willingness to see the thing through and a resourcefulness in reading and a certain taste

for the chase that has been suggested certainly as a goal for film, but I don't think has ever been

pushed quite this far." The *Magellan* cycle is therefore utopian because it projects a spectator

that does not yet exist; in the mode of difficult modernist comedies like *Finnegans Wake*, it

"breeds a new genetic strain [of reader] that has learned from the work how to read the work."[272]

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[271] Frampton and Simon, "Talking about *Magellan*: An Interview," 234.
[272] Frampton and Simon, 235.

The spectator who endures with the work and learns how to read it, how to stay with its perplexities, will discover the text resolving in their favour. This seems to correspond in some way to the satisfaction of pattern-detection in structural film, except the structuring of *Magellan* is of such complexity that its resolving will not be intrinsic to the text (cf. Snow's intention to make "protagonists" of film techniques[273]) but left to the active participation of the spectator.

Michael Zryd has carefully detailed the changing conceptual approaches Frampton took to the *Magellan* project as it evolved through the 1970s. According to Zryd, while the dream of a "grammatically complete synopsis" of the infinite film remained a generative concern for Frampton, the filmmaker came increasingly to doubt that systematic organization of his proposed "metahistory" of film was the way forth, at least partly for the reason that such "reductive logic," with its roots in a certain strain of modernism, lacked for "wit." Thus Frampton, in allegiance to a "more ludic modernism," began the process of ironizing his quest for the modernist total work, for example, by turning to "naïve" early films as metaphors for the major tradition of "modernist classics," which Frampton's metahistory of film was duty-bound to confront.[274] By siding with modernist "heresiarchs" like James Joyce, John Cage, and Marcel Duchamp, whose playfulness and humour maintained a healthy skepticism regarding guidelines for art, Frampton began to open *Magellan* to contingency. This meant leaving behind the "schematic" approach that characterized Frampton's previous films, to discover an ever-expanding and "genuinely complex" work the coherent ordering of which was the active concern of the spectator, who was invited by the incompleteness of *Magellan* to, writes Zryd, "participate and continue its infinite construction."[275]

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[273] See Snow's remarks in Hoolboom, "Michael Snow [Interview]."

[274] Michael Zryd, "History and Ambivalence in Hollis Frampton's *Magellan*," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 120.

[275] Michael Zryd, "*Magellan* [DVD Essay]," in *A Hollis Frampton Odyssey* (New York: Criterion Collection, 2012), 34.

When we speak of the copious inventory of comedy we must place the emphasis on copious, with its sights set on a horizon of uncountable plenitude. This would seem to require vacating the pursuit to "complete the set of all possible effects." In his book on the "Stoic Comedians" of literary modernism, Hugh Kenner writes of Joyce's *Ulysses*,

> This is the comedy of the Inventory, the comedy of exhaustion, comic precisely because exhaustive. The feeling proper to comic art, Joyce wrote, is joy, and by way of making clear what joy is, he distinguished it from desire. Now the virtue of exhaustiveness is this, that by it desire is utterly allayed. Nothing is missing. We have the double pleasure of knowing what should be present, and knowing that all of it is present.[276]

What *Ulysses* manifests, according to Kenner, is a "cyclical image of history, time's processes shuffling the same fifty-two cards for ever."[277] Instead of a feeling of terror and entrapment, this cyclicality produces joy – the feeling proper to comedy – because it signals that desiring can come to an end. "Our ultimate sense of [*Ulysses*], or one mode of our ultimate sense of it, is this: that it is the minute and reliable and exhaustive inventory of all the facts that it incorporates, or even implies."[278] Hence, the ostensible completion of all possible effects, achieved within a "closed field." As Federico Windhausen points out, apropos the influence of Kenner's concepts on Frampton, this drive for total structuring can also be seen as something "feigned" by the artist, a means to expose, within the context of art, the comic folly of high-minded adherence to empirical, rational, or logical systems.[279] I think this suggests another avenue to comic joy in encyclopedic works of film, aside from completeness. How might a work resolve in one's favour without thereby reaching the finale of its possible effects?

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[276] Hugh Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians: Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 54–55.

[277] Kenner, 63. Of course, shuffling a deck of fifty-two cards has an astronomically large number of permutational outcomes. This does not stop us from using card games as a way of ordering or structuring social gatherings, which otherwise might devolve into inconceivable chaos and complexity.

[278] Kenner, 66.

[279] Federico Windhausen, "Words into Film: Toward a Genealogical Understanding of Hollis Frampton's Theory and Practice," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 81.

RAMEAU'S NEPHEW BY DIDEROT (THANX TO DENNIS YOUNG) BY WILMA

SCHOEN

Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* is a film of four-and-a-half hours length, and a summary analysis of its twenty-five main parts would, appropriately enough, take us far beyond the scope of the few pages remaining in this chapter. I will therefore restrict my commentary to the overarching ideas and ambitions of Snow's film, examining a selection of its parts, and contextualizing its comic sweep.[280]

As the Diderot allusion of the title tells us, Snow's film aspires to the metaphor of the encyclopedia – in this case, to the task of compiling all there is to know about sound-image relations on film. Diderot himself reminds us that the work of an encyclopedia can never be just one person's, but must always be done by committee. "I am unable to believe that it is within the power of single man to know all that can be known," writes Diderot, "to make use of all the knowledge that exists; to see all that is to be seen; to understand all that is comprehensible."[281] Snow is not so conceited as to take full credit for the encyclopedism of *Rameau's*, something also alluded to in the title of the film, with its multiple authorial attributions. "Wilma Schoen" is, of course, one of Snow's anagrammatic pseudonyms; several more are listed in the film's epically long opening "Credits" sequence: Nice Slow Ham, Malice Shown, Noel W. I. Chasm, Male Cow Shin, to name but a few. Interspersed with the (real) names of the enormous cast of actors in the film – including such luminaries as Annette Michelson, Nam June Paik, Jonas

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[280] Essays which tackle the entirety of *Rameau's Nephew* include Regina Cornwell, "'Hearing Is Deceiving': Plane Sound and Light Talk in *'Rameau's Nephew' by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen*," in *Snow Seen: The Films and Photographs of Michael Snow* (Toronto: PMA Books, 1980), 123–46; R. Bruce Elder, "Sounding Snow: On Text and Sound in *Rameau's Nephew...*," in *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow, 1956-1991*, ed. Jim Shedden (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1995), 140–95; and Ivora Cusack and Stéfani de Loppinot, *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* [DVD Essay], trans. Pip Chodorov et al. (Paris: Exploding; Re:Voir Video, 2011). I have borrowed the section titles for *Rameau's Nephew* from the last source.

[281] Denis Diderot, "The Encyclopedia," in *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works*, trans. Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 278.

Mekas, Chantal Akerman, Keith Lock, Joyce Wieland, Babette Mangolte, and indeed P. Adams Sitney[282] – Snow's pseudonyms pad out an impressive credit roll of contributors to this encyclopedic enterprise. The anagrams implicate the theme of exhaustiveness, as they seem to run the gamut of meaningful (or at least, amusing) permutational possibilities on the letters of Snow's name.[283] They also reinforce the idea of word-as-image in *Rameau's Nephew*; following Frederick Ahl, we could say that anagrams "pertain more to the eye than to the ear."[284]

While the names in the "Credits" sequence scroll up the screen, as extended and unbroken as the image of a train travelling horizontally behind the credits, the offscreen voice of a man (Jimmy Jones) reads aloud each of the names. The man speaks with a stutter, causing a perceptible ebb and flow of synchronization between the appearance of a name onscreen and the oral recitation of it. The man occasionally has trouble with some pronunciations, and we hear Snow's own voice correcting him. These delays and hitches in the reading of the steadily flowing credit roll not only create a temporal disjunction in the sound-image relation of oral to written (on film) text. They also manifest a running theme in the film, of the wobbliness of words when placed in an aural setting (Snow's lessons in pronunciation then subtly satirize the idea of insisting on a "proper" relation of sound to its word-image). What becomes of words in the world? How does speech deform them, or affirm their shape? How does sound on film deform/affirm speech? An abiding concern for Snow in *Rameau's Nephew* is the hemispheric differences between the spoken/heard word as sign and the same word as "music"[285] – or, to use

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[282] This would not be the last time Sitney "appeared" in a Snow film. Look for the Sitney doppelganger (long grey beard, can't miss him) seated in a cinema near the end of **Corpus Callosum*.

[283] Though notes from Snow's archives show he had many more anagrams to choose from. It seems he merely selected the funniest. Michael Snow Fonds, box 80, file 3, Art Gallery of Ontario, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Toronto, Ontario.

[284] Frederick Ahl, "Ars Est Caelare Artem (Art in Puns and Anagrams Engraved)," in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford; New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 31.

[285] Regarding *Rameau's Nephew*, Snow has referenced "a struggle in the brain between perceiving as meaning and perceiving as music." See "transcript B" of an interview with John Massey in Michael Snow Fonds, box 76, file 20,

the theoretical parlance of the time, between *langue* and *parole*. At some point, the never-ending, halting recitation of the credits directs our attention to its own peculiar qualities as sound. Once again, Snow has us positioned along a path of transition where a thing with definite shape (here, a name, given as visual text) verges into or is balanced by an excessive counterpart (the less definite arena of sound). Snow concludes his published notes for the film with the question, "What is it like not to be able to read or write?" Such a query places Snow's film in both a Wittgensteinian-philosophical tradition, and in proximity to the formalism of a Brakhage, eager to perceive with "untutored" senses.[286]

There are a few good reasons to accept Snow's designation of *Rameau's Nephew* as a "sound comedy." At the most intellectual level, Snow's ambition is to make a "Philosophical comedy" whose "Gags" and "Routines" "exemplify philosophical statements / problems / proposals"; the model here is, again, Wittgenstein, with Snow seizing on the philosopher's proposition that philosophy could be written with jokes.[287] The film is more plainly felt as a comedy in that it adopts a segmented, sketch-revue-like structure containing countless instances of wordplay, enough to justify a critic like Lucy Fischer comparing *Rameau's Nephew* to the

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Art Gallery of Ontario, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Toronto, Ontario. Snow's film **Corpus Callosum* is of course named after the part of the brain that joins the two cerebral hemispheres. See also Hollis Frampton's discussion of a scene from his *Magellan* cycle in relation to the struggle between the brain's hemispheres that occurs in epileptic seizure. Some epileptics, notes Frampton, report feeling "euphoria" after seizure, as though "some very fundamental and very painful conflict has at least for a time been resolved." This leads Frampton to conclude that the seizure has resolved in the epileptic's favour, hence, is comical; Frampton suggests that he desires a similarly favourable resolution for spectators experiencing *Magellan*. "St. Hollis (Part 2)," *Cinemanews* 78, no. 3/4 (1978): 15, 17.

[286] For suggestions on how such an alliance between Wittgensteinian and Brakhagian impulses could be brokered, see Rebecca A. Sheehan, "Stan Brakhage, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Renewed Encounter with the Everyday," *Screen* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 118–35. Relevant to our discussion of Snow's *Rameau's Nephew*, Sheehan quotes Brakhage on the experience of hearing Tagore poetry in Bengali: "I realized how important it was to approach poetry first through its sounds. And then I learned, later, that was a way for some people to approach film first, just through its vision" (127).

[287] Michael Snow, "Notes for *Rameau's Nephew*," *October* 4 (Autumn 1977): 48.

verbal antics of the Marx Brothers.[288] The play with the relation of sound to picture is another seemingly limitless source of humour in the film. For example, the idea that the film is, as Snow says, a "talking picture" becomes fodder for punning in such cases as the "Voice Scene" sequence, in which characters in an office react to a voice that initially sounds to us to be located offscreen, but by the characters' indications is emanating from various objects pictured in the office ("This is unbelievable: that piece of cheese spoke!"); when the screen goes black at the end of the sequence, the voice asks, "Where am I?" as though partaking in the darkness of the picture. Snow also indulges a more basic humour in the rude incongruity between a picture-cause and its sound-effect, as in the "Hotel" sequence when the playing of a piano elicits orgasmic moaning sounds; and in the "Fart" sequence when the spray of an aerosol can emits the sound of a long fart – a gag one might expect to find, or hear, in a Jerry Lewis movie.[289]

Rameau's Nephew exploits the vulgar – in the dual senses of everyday, and lewd – subject matter traditionally expected to reside in the comedy genre. Many of the segments in the film are conversational and suffused with communal feeling, with groups of actors, some of whom are no doubt familiar and friendly with one another, gathered in casual settings to practice verbal gymnastics with each other, at times hardly able to stifle their amusement (cf. Iris Murdoch on the sociability of humour: "In laughing, we turn to our friends"[290]). A good deal of the phrases heard in Rameau's Nephew are stock or deliberately mundane English expressions:

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[288] "Snow's play with sound and language in RAMEAU'S NEPHEW quite perversely makes me think of Chico, with his foreign accent, mispronunciations and aural misperceptions (mistaking 'viaduct' for 'why a duck?'); of Groucho, with his obsession for puns and the literalization of cliché metaphors. And finally of Harpo, for his sublime mistrust of verbal language and his preference for the unambiguous utterance of a clown's honking horn." Lucy Fischer, "'May a Duck?': An Inquiry into Michael Snow's Rameau's Nephew," University Film Study Newsletter 7, no. 4 (April 1977): 6.
[289] J. Hoberman compares Snow's work to the "vulgar modernism" of Frank Tashlin (one of Jerry Lewis' key directors) and Ernie Kovacs, in J. Hoberman, "Vulgar Modernism," Artforum 20, no. 6 (February 1982): 76.
[290] Quoting Murdoch in full: "Comedy has an obvious built-in factor of disunity, a return to the contingent, an appeal to individual experience and common-sense. In laughing, we turn to our friends." Iris Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 91.

"Seeing is believing"; "Count your blessings"; "Something's on the tip of my tongue"; "You don't say"; "You said it"; "I'm hanging on every word you say." Snow tells us that, in preparing the film over the course of three years, he obsessively took note of what people around him said and the way in which they said it[291] – in other words, the "relativity" and "nuance" of ordinary language became of prime concern to his film.[292] Snow has given an explanation for his use of "common," "quotidian," or "domestic" subject matter in his work: "If the 'subject' as a class is familiar it (hopefully) makes it easier for the spectator to see what has been done with it to make it art."[293] This can be correlated with Snow's interest in using jokes in *Rameau's Nephew* "crude enough that some will survive dismemberment."[294] In some cases in the film, a familiar phrase will act as a mental anchor as we listen to mutated spin-offs of its words and syntax. For example, in the "Plane" sequence Goethe's famous saying that "Architecture is frozen music" is indirectly spelled out through a constellation of warped phrases, including "Music is holy," "Holiness is fucking architecture," and "Music is frozen fucking" (indeed the whole sequence is warped by the slowing and quickening of the Auricon sound camera at the point of each cut, and by modulations in volume during each shot). This jumbling and shuffling of words is another semi-permutational strategy both to install the image of encyclopedic thoroughness in the film, and to push the boundaries of sense (does "Holiness is fucking architecture" make a kind of twisted sense, after all?).

The insertion of "fucking" into phrases (see also, from "Plane," the punning "What kind of fucking music is this?") is only one instance of the vulgar-as-in-crass content of *Rameau's*

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[291] See Snow's remarks in "Talking Pictures with David Cronenberg and Michael Snow," *The Lictor*, March 4, 1982, 7.

[292] Michael Snow, "Notes for 'Rameau's Nephew,'" *October* 4 (Autumn 1977): 47.

[293] Catsou Roberts and Michael Snow, "An International Collage," in *Michael Snow: Almost Cover to Cover* (London; Bristol: Black Dog Publishing; Arnolfini, 2001), 12.

[294] Snow, "Notes for 'Rameau's Nephew,'" Autumn 1977, 46. The example Snow gives in his notes for the film is "Aunt Rhoda's" joke about a man who encounters a nude woman in an elevator, capped with the punchline, "My wife has an outfit just like that."

Nephew. Overheard in the film are not only eruptions of speech and music, but of lower bodily functions. "Fart" performs backwards, and then plays back in reverse to "correct," a dialogue scene in which people discuss the smell of a fart in a room (the two temporal directions of the split sequence, each in itself containing a ←→ contradiction, may describe the exhaling of a fart and the inhaling of its aroma). The sequence "Piss Duet" presents a naked man and woman, each urinating into a bucket that has been mic'ed up, amplifying for us the changes in pitch as the respective buckets fill with liquid. In the "Laughing Chair" section, we hear the sound of a man's boisterous laughter, hooting and howling over top of the image of a man, woman, and baby sitting casually in a studio; is the laughter targeted at these people? No, it seems not, for the woman is observed to be laughing at times as well, and her pointing for the baby at something offscreen suggests the laughter may itself be the source of amusement. The full-bodied, offscreen laughter continues into the next image, of an empty chair with a microphone perched beside it.[295]

   In his preparatory notes, Snow refers to *Rameau's Nephew* as "The Film that Covers the Orifices."[296] His crude evocation of the music, so to speak, of the bodily functions – sinking us lower and lower in the body, down from the voice box – is a way of exploring all outlets of the human body as instrument. In the beginning of the extensive "Embassy" sequence, a spotlight travels across the faces of a series of actors[297]; as it does so it triggers the various actors to emit messy breathing, snoring, and burping noises – improvisational solos for the throat, tongue, and lips. We are once more in the vicinity of the bursting container; as previously suggested, Snow's

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[295] The laughter in this sequence is provided by none other than P. Adams Sitney; the empty yellow chair is the same chair seen at the far end of the loft in *Wavelength*. Cusack and de Loppinot, *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* [DVD Essay], 100.

[296] The phrase is jotted down amongst other stray notes on the film, such as "language of holes" and "Somewhere, somehow somebody says, 'I though this was your orifice!' (meaning 'office')." Michael Snow Fonds, box 80, file 3, Art Gallery of Ontario, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Toronto, Ontario.

[297] As Ivora Cusack and Stéfani de Loppinot brilliantly observe, the overexposure caused by the spotlight on the faces "creates a sort of orifice in the image itself, which could seem to be the source of human sound and speech, but for the presence of the microphone in the scene." Cusack and de Loppinot, *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* [DVD Essay], 87.

compulsive return to sexual organs – and here we could add his concern with flatulence and explosive laughter (one of Snow's preparatory notes on the film reads, "LAUGHTER AND ORGASM: relation?"[298]) – can be figured as a preoccupation with the orificial points at which bodily form allows passage and discharge. Snow seems drawn to the crude interjections and punctuations made possible by these orifices. In the penultimate segment of *Rameau's Nephew*, Snow himself sits at a table, showing and naming a series of objects to an acquaintance (Reg Holmes). First, Snow presents a cymbal (pun obviously intended); next, an orange (that most literal of fruits); finally, a banana – to which Snow gives the name, "yellow." Upon this last demonstration, Snow bursts into spontaneous laughter, unable to contain himself, and we cut to the film's end credits.

(Image 3: *Rameau's Nephew . . .*)

(Image 4: *Rameau's Nephew . . .*)

I have barely begun to scratch the surface (now there's an avant-garde expression!) of *Rameau's Nephew*, and I feel as though I could go on forever tracking the multitude of sound-image relations, verbal cross-references, premeditated and spontaneous mistakes, and numerous performance registers that make up its vast comic quilt. At its conclusion, the film itself does not seem convinced that it has come to the end of its task; the "Addenda" attached to the closing

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[298] Snow, "Notes for 'Rameau's Nephew,'" Autumn 1977, 44.

credits treat us to the following sounds, absent from the body of the film: gargling, swallowing, baby cooing, vomiting, bird chirping, screaming, weeping, spitting; as well as a further list of ordinary English sayings ("Needless to say," "That's better left unsaid," "In a manner of speaking," etc.), and, finally, the name "Dennis Young," as we see an image of an elevator opening to reveal Young himself, who sticks his tongue out at us. I suggest it is not only the encyclopedic impulse to blame for the daunting length and plenitude of *Rameau's Nephew*, but also what we have been calling, after Dupree, the copious inventory which belongs to a particular heritage of comedy. In his notes for the film, Snow writes, "List all possible manipulables [of sound-image relations]. Computer/cross-index all the permutations, combinations. Use this as a script."[299] Does the resulting film imply modernist, total-work completeness – that is, following Kenner's notion of the comic inventory of *Ulysses*, a "minute and reliable and exhaustive inventory of all the facts that it incorporates, or even implies"? I would instead propose the model of the copious inventory as apt to understanding *Rameau's Nephew*'s comic sweep, since the copious inventory does not see completeness as an end. The copious inventory implies abundance in such a way that it could continue infinitely (seen this way, the guiding thought of a Diderotian encyclopedia becomes one more container-as-ruse). Even if a computer were to successfully permute a relatively definitive list of sound-image manipulables in the apparatus of film (synch sound, a-synch sound, sound that guides the picture, picture that guides the sound, etc.), there yet remains the "nuance" in people's expressions of words that Snow introduces as another potential sound-image relation in the film. In other words, the wild and woolly social world spills into *Rameau's Nephew*, and maintains a dialogue with the

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[299] Snow, 45.

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film's more controlled procedures.[300] One of the covert achievements of *Rameau's Nephew* is to catalogue the way shifting accents – in the sense of differential placing of emphases on words, and individual manners of speaking – change our relations to words/sounds, the things they represent, and the people who speak them. The film plunges into social-verbal confusion in a festive show of negative capability.

There is certainly a case to be made that *Rameau's Nephew* does not belong in a discussion of structural film. The multitude of presentational styles in *Rameau's Nephew*, including Snow's staging of a self-avowed "eighteenth century" space,[301] seem a radical departure from the predetermined shape so often inscribed in a fixed camera technique of the structural films prior, as in such camera-protagonist films as *Wavelength*, *Standard Time*, ←→, and *La région centrale.* Sitney himself wants to situate *Rameau's Nephew* in a period of increasingly post-structural serialized construction, a "dialectical development of the issues raised" in structural film, pivoting to an emphasis on word-and-image relationships.[302] Sitney also associates *Rameau's Nephew* within an emerging mode of 1970s avant-garde work that Sitney identifies as "Menippean satire" – "A dialogue of forms and voices, open to narrative elaborations but not requiring them, in which characters embody ideas rather than manifest complex psychologies . . . All the ideas proposed in a Menippean satire are subject to irony; the very concept of a philosophical resolution becomes an occasion for parody."[303]

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[300] On the many dialogic concerns of Snow's film, and their connection to the Diderot text, see Elder, "Sounding Snow: On Text and Sound in *Rameau's Nephew...*" See also Snow's discussion of "personal and regional pronunciation" in *Rameau's Nephew*, and its connection to some of his sound/music practices, in Annette Michelson, "The Sound of Music: A Conversation with Michael Snow," *October* 114 (Autumn 2005): 46.

[301] Michael Snow, "The Camera and the Spectator: Michael Snow in Discussion with John Du Cane," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, ed. Louise Dompierre (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 90.

[302] Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 372.

[303] Sitney, 410–11.

There is, however, something to be said for *Rameau's Nephew* as a continuation of concerns in the Snow films typically held as exemplars of structural film. The idea of structure remains operative in *Rameau's Nephew*, even if it does not issue in the single gestalt forms available to apprehension in the structural films prior. Snow has claimed the *Rameau's* twenty-five-odd segments comprise a sentence, the words of which the viewer can decode one segment at a time.[304] Snow does not, however, insist on the authoritativeness of his particular ordering of the segments; he proposes that they could be rearranged, "like Lego," to create a new sentence.[305] If structure once again provides the grounds for analytical concentration, Snow, as ever, does not permit this structure to forestall the option for play.

CONCLUSION

I conclude by addressing some possible sources and contexts for the senses of humour hitherto discussed. There is much to be said for the role of "themes and variations" in Snow's films, and how this can be traced or connected to his career as a jazz musician, where structure – the standard – provides the jumping off point for elastic feats of improvisation.[306] Relatedly, Snow's status as an artist working across and between mediums is also important to note. Snow has said, one supposes only half-jokingly, "I'm not a professional. My paintings are done by a filmmaker, sculpture by a musician, films by a painter, music by a filmmaker, paintings by a

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[304] In a December 1975 letter to Snow, Amy Taubin describes the effort of P. Adams Sitney to decode the structure of *Rameau's*: "[Sitney] said that ever since you said it was a sentence he's been trying to figure out the sentence and what he's come up with is 'Mike (that's the whistling scene) focus (or suck off) and then the last world is Snow (the truck)." Michael Snow Fonds, box 80, file 7, Art Gallery of Ontario, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Toronto, Ontario.

[305] See Hoolboom, "Michael Snow [Interview]."

[306] Snow discusses the connection between jazz theme-and-variation approaches and his film work in Hoolboom. See also Snow's remarks on jazz in the documentary *Michael Snow Up Close* (1995), by Jim Shedden and Alexa-Frances Shaw. For a collection of essays on Snow's musical works, see Michael Snow, ed., *Music/Sound, 1948-1993: The Performed and Recorded Music/Sound of Michael Snow, Solo and with Various Ensembles, His Sound-Films and Sound Installations: Improvisation/Composition from 1948 to 1993* (Toronto: A.A. Knopf, 1994).

sculptor, sculpture by a filmmaker, films by a musician, music by a sculptor."[307] We should be mindful of this remark before we rush to call Snow's structural work "modernist," if by that term we mean art that inclines to the "essentialistic and ontological."[308] These latter concerns, writes R. Bruce Elder in an essay on Snow, were conceivably evacuated, in and after minimalism (and, we should say, with the return to early avant-gardes for inspiration), in favour of "phenomenological and epistemological problems."[309] In such an artistic climate, where Snow can surely be located, the concern with fixing the essence of "medium" falls away as artists heed how mediums are constituted, how art objects are looked at and understood. I would suggest this concern with sense and knowledge, along with Snow's free passage between various artistic media, is implicated in Snow's willingness to inflect, counterbalance, and question his erected structures through humour.

A study of Snow's humour would not be complete without closer consideration of the artist's penchant for puns. First and foremost, Snow is as guilty as any of his reviewers of committing hacky puns on his surname. Beyond this, there is a plethora of puns waiting to be discovered in the titles and scripts of his films,[310] visual art, and music. *Venetian Blind* (1970), the name of a photo series featuring self-portraits of Snow with his eyes shut in Venice, is but

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[307] Quoted in Michael Snow et al., *Michael Snow: Works, 1969-1978, Films, 1964-1976* (Luzern: Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1979), 9.

[308] On the other hand, one should be careful not to overstate Snow's commitment to "intermedia" or "mixed media," however much it seems to apply to certain pieces (e.g., *Right Reader* [1965]). Snow is wont to emphasize his interest in the specificity of mediums; one presumes this is connected to Snow's interest in containers. See Snow's conflicted remarks on "mixed media" in Michael Snow, "First to Last," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, ed. Louise Dompierre (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 28. It seems sensible to adopt Philip Monk's view on this matter: "Snow was enough of a modernist that he sought to keep media independent. He attempted to discover latencies within media obscured by what was shared across them. What gets 'mixed' are not media but levels of presentation and representation." Monk, "Around Wavelength: The Sculpture, Film and Photo-Work of Michael Snow from 1967 to 1969," 321.

[309] R. Bruce Elder, "All Things in Their Times -- Part 2," *Ciné-Tracts* 5, no. 17 (Summer/Fall 1982): 39.

[310] To cite one of my favourites from *Rameau's Nephew*: "I'm the original. Some day my prints will come."

one example of the kind of "dreadful"[311] punning to be expected from Snow.[312] I take this

punning to be more than simply a sideshow attraction in Snow's work. The ubiquity of puns in

Snow is a major reason to compare his work to that of Marcel Duchamp (another, of course, is

Snow's lack of compunction about working between mediums, though in this influence Snow

was not alone among artists of the 1960s[313]). Duchamp remarks,

> You know, puns have always been considered a low form of wit, but I find them a source
> of stimulation both because of their actual sound and because of the unexpected
> meanings attached to the interrelationships of disparate words. For me, this is an infinite
> field of joy – and it's always right at hand. Sometimes four or five different levels of
> meaning come through.[314]

A similar rationale could be said to guide Snow's rampant punning; to extend my metaphor yet

again, the pun is another container bursting with potential. In her indispensable English

translations of the "nonsense" phrases of Duchamp's film *Anémic Cinéma* (1926), Katrina

Martin reveals for the Anglophone the extent of Duchamp's virtuosity with puns.[315] For

example, one of *Anémic Cinéma*'s spinning plates carries the phrase AVEZ VOUS DÉJA MIS

LA MOËLLE DE L'ÉPÉE DANS POÊLE DE L'AIMÉE? (roughly translated: "Have you ever

put the marrow of the sword into the stove of the loved one?"), a phrase found to contain puns

for both male and female genitals, for incest, death – here, bits of elevated poetry; there, slangy

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[311] The word is Malcolm Le Grice's: "[*Rameau's Nephew*] mixes philosophical conundrums in visual form with dreadful puns – Rose Sélavy is still watching and listening." Malcolm Le Grice, "Snow Perspective and Time," in *Michael Snow: Almost Cover to Cover* (London; Bristol: Black Dog Publishing; Arnolfini, 2001), 110.

[312] For a more generous reading of *Venetian Blind*, see Tila Landon Kellman, *Figuring Redemption: Resighting My Self in the Art of Michael Snow* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 90–97. Kellman's book is a good source on the puns and humour of Snow's visual art.

[313] Thierry de Duve writes, "Being a true child of Duchamp, Snow realized that you could make art with any medium whatsoever, and that what it was henceforth important to explore was the interplay between media." de Duve, *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, 41.

[314] Quoted in Katharine Kuh, "Marcel Duchamp," in *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 88. For an extensive treatment of punning in Duchamp, see George H. Bauer, "Duchamp's Ubiquitous Puns," in *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, ed. Rudolf Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 127–48.

[315] A copy of Martin's essay can be found in Snow's fonds at the Art Gallery of Ontario, with an attached note from Martin expressing a hope that Snow "might like some of the jokes therein." Michael Snow Fonds, box 80, file 6, Art Gallery of Ontario, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Toronto, Ontario.

vulgarity.[316] Many of the puns in *Anémic Cinéma* refer to French idioms for genitals and sexual

congress, a preoccupation also found in such works as Duchamp's phallic sculpture *Objet-dard*

(1951), which plays on a French term for dildo. Snow has given us his definition of this practice

in Duchamp: "wonderful hetero intellectual smut." In Duchamp's handling, the "low wit" of

puns is discovered to contain "a much higher degree of intellectuality."[317] I hope I have

established in this chapter how such a paradoxical outcome would appeal to Snow.

There is a less expected figure whose use of puns can be placed in conversation with

Snow's – namely, Stan Brakhage. I enlist here Rebecca A. Sheehan's vital work on the function

of the pun in Stan Brakhage's writing and filmmaking. Sheehan quotes from an early Brakhage

essay, called "My eye":

> I deck my prose with whatever puns come my way, aiming at deliberate ambiguity,
> hoping thereby to create a disbelief in the rigidity of any linguistic statement, knowing
> only poetry immortal enough to escape the rigorous belief in any one word-world as a
> sense-killing finality.[318]

To Sheehan, Brakhage's punning is best conceived in a modernist inheritance stemming, above

others, from Gertrude Stein, whose "search for a continuous present" (for Stein, in words)

exerted a weighty influence over the art of Brakhage. Sheehan argues,

> The logical process of the pun puts the reader in the throes of the immediate: meaning
> gives way to meanings that bifurcate and trifurcate once again as the process of capturing
> meaning involves a shuttling between points of sense and nonsense. For Brakhage, the
> "search for a continuous present" Stein seeks in her essay, "Composition as Explanation,"
> locates the present in the search itself, the chase of Zeno's arrow that resists reading the
> meaning of a word according to the dictates of what has come before it. For the meaning
> of what has come before encounters perpetual attempts to reconcile sense and nonsense,
> the impulse to work towards meaning and the temptation to play.[319]

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[316] Katrina Martin, "Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic-Cinéma*," *Studio International* 189/973 (February 1975): 60.

[317] Quoted in Francis Roberts, "I Propose to Strain the Laws of Physics," *Art News* 67, no. 8 (December 1968): 62.

[318] Quoted in Sheehan, "Stan Brakhage, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Renewed Encounter with the Everyday," 124.

[319] Rebecca Anne Sheehan, "Towards an 'Infinite Cinema': American Avant-Garde Film and Its Modernist Inheritance" (Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 107.

Now, the "search for a continuous present" does not exactly vex the work of Snow, however much it appears thematically, or ironically, in such films as *So Is This*. But as Sheehan helps us to see, there may be something nonetheless shared in Brakhage and Snow's mutual attraction to puns.[320] Pace Brakhage's cranky estimation of structural film, Snow also has his compulsions to avoid "any one word-world as a sense-killing finality." This, or something like it, is what I have been meaning to suggest in tracking humour through Snow.

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[320] Sheehan even recovers the pun "wavelengths" from Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision*, and argues for its direct influence on Snow. Sheehan, 8 and 112.

CHAPTER 2

"BLACK AND WHITE, PORTAPAK, WHAT THE HELL":

HUMOUR IN EARLY FEMINIST VIDEO ART

> The woman's movement has the distinction of being the only social movement in the history of the United States that is regarded by its opponents as a joke.
>   – Roberta Salper[321]

As a joke. That is, something to joke about, or perhaps something that functions as a joke in itself. But not a joke told by women.

In a biographical sketch posted to their website, activist art group the Guerrilla Girls make a declaration of tactics: "We use humor to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny."[322] This statement contains the time-honoured moral justification of humour one often encounters where humour intersects with art and politics (think of Renaissance satire), but it adds something altogether new to the apologia: a defense of the humourist's entitlement to a sense of humour in the first place. At issue here is the ubiquity of the "humourless feminist" stereotype. Dispelling this stereotype becomes the absurd initial proof expected of seemingly any discussion of humour in feminist culture.

As someone who has engaged discussions of this sort for several years now, I can confirm the persistent prejudice against feminist humour as a – for lack of a better word – "quirky" subject, despite the efforts of many volumes and articles to adduce works of funny feminist practice (many of which this chapter will cite), not to mention the various models of rhetorical wit supplied by feminist writers as disparate in viewpoint as Germaine Greer, Kathy Acker, Roxane Gay, Hannah Black, and Andrea Long Chu, to name but a few. To speak anecdotally, when I was invited in 2015 to give a paper at a colloquium on feminist humour,

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[321] Roberta Salper, *Female Liberation: History and Current Politics* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 3.

[322] "2009FAQs," Guerrilla Girls, accessed December 16, 2016, http://www.guerrillagirls.com/2009faqs/.

more than one colleague teased the colloquium's theme as an oxymoronic punchline.[323] I was

therefore not surprised when, at the colloquium, one panelist opened her talk with the tried-and-

true "How many feminists does it take to screw in a light bulb?" joke,[324] mocking the still-

standing odds against our participation in such a field of inquiry. Clearly this was not a standard

case of humour theorists admitting how ridiculous it can be when droning academics gather to

analyze the fun out of humour. Rather, when it comes to the study of feminist humour,

acknowledging ridicule of feminism is not so much an occasion for self-deprecation as a way to

start reflecting on and opposing a culturally active bias.

The following chapter will not be consumed with exploding the notion that feminism, in

the many forms it takes, lacks a sense of humour. In light of the critical utility we routinely grant

to humour, it is patently ignorant to cancel out humour as a potential mode of feminist practice.

At the outset of this chapter I am circling the notion of humourless feminism in order to

approach common understandings about what it means to have and display a sense of humour.

Partial to these understandings is the idea that a sense of humour makes one flexible, and

moreover that this flexibility is consummately revealed in a playful abdication of one's

principles. Merrie Bergmann admits the accusation that feminism is humourless pains her

especially because of its suggestion that something "fanatical" lies at the heart of feminism.[325]

As I hope to show in this chapter, feminist uses of humour do indeed inject flexibility into

feminism's political projects, upsetting any claim that feminism is fundamentally fanatical,

possessed of unbending articles of faith. However, the nature of this flexibility is not

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[323] The colloquium was called "HUMOROUS > DISRUPTIONS" and was presented by the journal *Synoptique* at Concordia University, Montréal. For a list of recent symposia on feminist art humour, see Jo Anna Isaak, "Whoever Wants to Understand Is Invited to Play," in *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2010), 138, footnote 1.

[324] Answer: "That's not funny."

[325] Merrie Bergmann, "How Many Feminists Does It Take To Make A Joke? Sexist Humor and What's Wrong With It," *Hypatia* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 75.

concessionary, a compromise with ideological opponents, but remains concerned with the articulation of specifically feminist horizons.

"Articulation" is a key term here, and for the time being I mean it in the sense of a joint, a position of flexibility. As Lewis Hyde writes, humour can be thought to introduce articulation into places where stiffness threatens to set in; humour can "oil the joints," so to speak, between polarized positions.[326] Of course, the hazard of this is that humour can reanimate old structures, performing a kind of affective maintenance that makes the existing structure of things newly pliable ("if we can laugh at our condition…"), when what the horizon of feminism, in the radical sense, calls for is total restructuring. It will plainly not do for the feminist to occupy the traditional position of a "joker" in society, whom Mary Douglas describes as a figure expressing "consensus" in her dissenting humour, but only towards the end of "[lightening] for everyone the oppressiveness of social reality."[327] My understanding of feminist humour is that it does not merely seek to induce "coping laughter," the opening of certain emotional options within oppressive circumstances, but furthermore constitutes an argument against the intolerability of these circumstances that doubles as propaganda for change. Feminism, like other activist struggles, must be wary of humour's flexibility so that the object of feminist humour does not rest in feel-good laughter, resignation experienced as wiggle room, but in the taking of a hard line stance. At the same time, as the historical development of feminism shows us, in order to persist into the future the activist project requires openness to re-articulation in light of emerging factors, an ability that can be compared to having a sense of humour about oneself. That is to say, what this articulate humour gestures to is the idea of feminist action as partial, provisional, and plural.

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[326] Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: North Point Press, 1998), 274.
[327] Mary Douglas, "Jokes," in *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 158.

In this chapter, my examples of how such flexibility can operate in feminist humour will mainly come from early – that is, second wave – feminist video art, for reasons I will presently make clear. First I will take a closer look at certain dogma surrounding what it means to have and use a sense of humour, to reveal the basis for labelling feminism as humourless, and to clear the way for a theorization of how humour functions in feminist practice.

HUMOURLESSNESS

To begin with, we could say there is no sense in denying feminism's humourlessness. Once we define humour as a capacity for openness, we see that it cannot hold as the foundation of a committed and specific ethical-political stance. Even if one were to commit wholeheartedly to humour as the guiding principle of one's conduct, this commitment must be in some part humourless if it is to be at all consistent. As Lauren Berlant has recently argued,

> [Humorlessness] involves a commitment to principles, after all, to a world and to being reliable, which is to say, to some repetitions. It props up the arrangement of personhood we call identity or personality; it is central to any kind of fidelity or obedience in love, politics, and religion; and it can cathect us to habit. It is sneaky and often occupies a space of self-unknowing in people who understand themselves to be responsive, engaged, open, and kind.[328]

Humourlessness is thus found everywhere in contests over values, "associated both with political correctness *and* with the privilege that reproduces inequality as a casual, natural order of things. Humorlessness wedges an encounter in order to control it, creating a buttress of immobility and impasse."[329] Berlant makes no particular reference to feminism, but her essay helps us figure, or rather reclaim, humourlessness as a productive sticking point of feminist projects. The "wedge" of humourlessness is indispensible to the confrontations effected between feminism and its

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[328] Lauren Berlant, "Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 313–14.
[329] Berlant, 308.

rivals; however, this is only to say that humourlessness is instrumental to winning political victories, as indeed humour is as well, whatever the case may be. To allege that feminism is humourless per se is to confuse the tactical for something total.

Nonetheless, the allegation is frequently made and so deserves to be dismantled. The stereotyping of feminists as essentially humourless[330] – tragically incapable of "getting" or "taking" a sexist joke – appears to rest on the following assumptions: 1) That having a sense of humour means the willingness to match humour with laughter in every instance, even – as in the case of the accused laughless feminist – when that instance is meant to insult the would-be laugher. Mary Douglas writes that "[i]t would be wrong to suppose that the acid test of a joke is whether it provokes laughter or not,"[331] and we could add that it would be equally wrong to suppose that laughter is the acid test of a sense of humour. One could very well have a sense of the humour intended by an insult without thereby finding this insult funny, in other words, deriving amused pleasure from it. Besides that, a sense of humour, when it is most admired in people, usually entails discernment and creativity, not obsequious laughter.[332] 2) That to be insulted by humour, to refuse its invitation to laughter, means to fail to understand that jesting is not the same as really wounding. *Can't you take a joke?* goes the common phrase – which is to say, *Are you really so weak?* But the refusal to laugh need not be an objection to a perceived wound (say, to words that hurt one's feelings); rather, it could be to see clearly the power

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[330] Merrie Bergmann argues that this accusation of humorlessness against feminism is merely a refinement of a previous claim that *women* have no sense of humour. Bergmann, "How Many Feminists Does It Take To Make A Joke?," 65. For an example of a popular press attempt to brand second wave feminism as humourless, see Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 28–30.

[331] Douglas, "Jokes," 148.

[332] On the other hand, Mary Ann Doane maintains that there is a difference between "getting" and "reading" a joke; the former suggests automatic comprehension linked with the affect of laughter or pleasure. In other words, we don't really "get" a joke if we don't find it instantly amusing. Doane admits she is sometimes caught off-guard by a sexist joke, that she "gets" such a joke before having the chance to "read" it in a secondary process of feminist critique. Mary Ann Doane, "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," *Discourse* 11, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1988-89): 50–51.

struggle of humour – staged however "unseriously" – and to resist submission even on the imaginary terms of a jest. The feminist who objects to the sexist joke recognizes that the joker seeks temporary consensus-building laughter (and thus understands how humour operates), and why should feminism even for a moment join consensus around sexist beliefs, to imagine in a laugh what it would feel like to forget one's care about sexism? In truth, such consensus mimics an all-too-familiar interpellation process, a culturally imposed forgetting and role-playing, against which feminism has vowed unfailing resistance. From this we can argue that sexist jokes merit no laughter because of their profound stereotypicality. Lisa Merrill writes, "women's so-called 'lack of humor' is, in fact, a refusal to comply with the *premise* of a joke . . . When women no longer identify with the way in which we traditionally have been defined, humor which ridicules our departure from those expectations no longer amuses us."[333] 3) That feminists aren't capable of laughing at a *truly* funny joke at their expense, if ever one should be produced.[334]

In her "Killjoy Manifesto," Sara Ahmed aligns the "killjoy movement" in feminism with a categorical refusal to "laugh at jokes designed to cause offense."[335] Many of my remarks in the previous paragraph interpret an argument made elsewhere by Ahmed, that the killjoy's mission to destroy pleasures like offensive joking is not the result of some *essential* unhappiness in feminism, a deep-down incapacity to share in the joy of others, but rather is a strategy meant to address what feminists are unhappy *about*.[336] We could restate this to say that feminism can never be humourless per se (though it would be fair to assume that at least one feminist out there

[333] Lisa Merrill, "Feminist Humor: Rebellious and Self-Affirming," *Women's Studies* 15, no. 1–3 (September 1988): 273.
[334] On the topic of women's "ingroup" humour – which might include jokes at women's expense – see Ida Applebroog, "The '"I Am Heathcliffe, Says Catherine"' Syndrome," *Heresies* 1, no. 2 (May 1977): 118–24.
[335] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 261.
[336] Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2010), http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/print_ahmed.htm.

never laughed in her life), but only determined not to humour those whose pleasure is premised on the degradation of women and other disenfranchised groups. This is a pleasure that must be killed, that must be met with willful anger, not abiding laughter. There are other joys to partake of in this world. Killing joy-that-brings-offense may be one of them.

Indeed, we can add to the previous list of three assumptions a fourth: the notion that killjoy feminism – the kind that refuses laughter at sexist joking – cannot itself be humorous. A recent performance and installation piece that exemplifies the humour of killjoy queer-feminism is Allyson Mitchell and Dierdre Logue's "lesbian feminist haunted house," *Killjoy's Kastle* (first staged in Toronto in 2013). Modelled parodically after a Christian-Evangelical "hell house," the performance space of *Killjoy's Kastle* is inhabited by a variety of creatures and monsters from the queer-feminist netherworld – for example, "polyamorous vampiric grannies, a demented women studies professor, and lesbian zombie folk singers," as well as Valerie Solanas.[337] Visitors to the house are guided through a series of nightmarishly colourful rooms (crossing, at one point, a "gender-ambiguous hairy hole") that seek to educate, confront, spook, and amuse: a "domestic" space comes adorned with giant spider webs and the aforementioned granny vampires; a graveyard scene displays the headstones of dead lesbian-feminist organizations and ideas; a stitching witch at her sewing machine delivers a treatise on the war on drugs, the prison-industrial-military complex, and their interwoven racial and political consequences.

The longer cultural history of feminism furnishes many instances in which the practice of killing joy adopts the frame of a confrontational humour. In a 1985 issue dedicated to satire, the editors of feminist art magazine *Heresies* call for a critical humour that is "merciless,

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[337] Thank you to Laura Levin for pointing me to this piece. See also Allyson Mitchell and Cait McKinney, eds., *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019). I quote here from the jacket copy for this (as of my writing) soon-to-be-published book. A tour of the house is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4S-OORBj9o

unrepentant, probing, and distressing to its targets."[338] Harnessing the power of offense – taking

the offensive as much as being offensive – for feminist ends, the contributors to this issue fire

hostile, sarcastic, witty satire at the "polluted channels of the Establishment." Per the editorial

statement, "Satire, like feminism, envisions change." While male chauvinist and feminist

humour alike may intend distress for their targets, only feminism intends it seriously – defined

here as non-stereotypically – as a distress not commonly felt, as a redistribution of power. This

explains why the excuse "It's only a joke" is readier to hand for the male chauvinist, who may be

willing to downplay his authority in a humour transaction, even to play up its triteness, when he

is so amply compensated with the rewards of power in other parts of life.[339]

FUNNY FUCK-YOUS IN FEMINISM

It is by combining humour with anger and demand for change that much of feminist art

practice in the twentieth-century takes on its unyielding critical force. Ara Osterweil's paper

"Fuck You! A Feminist Guide to Surviving the Art World" gives striking indication of this

transgressive trend, proposing a taxonomy of humour-inflected actions and confrontations ("fuck

yous") in second wave feminist art. Examples include Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* (1967),

a tract calling for the elimination of men which Osterweil describes as a "feminist intervention, a

significant work of art, and a meaningful political act" that is also "fucking funny"[340]; the

"demand for equality" evinced by Yoko Ono's 1971 unauthorized solo show at the Museum of

Modern Art, in which Ono took a giant F and rechristened the tony institution the Museum of

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[338] "Satire," *Heresies* 5, no. 3 (1985): 1.

[339] For an essay on the excuses we make for "inappropriate" laughter (though not for the crafting of inappropriate jokes per se) see William Cheng, "Taking Back the Laugh: Comedic Alibis, Funny Fails," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 528–49.

[340] Ara Osterweil, "Fuck You! A Feminist Guide to Surviving the Art World," *Artforum International* 54, no. 10 (Summer 2016): 321.

Modern *Fart*[341]; and the "killing with kindness" of Adrian Piper's *My Calling (Card) #1 (for Dinners and Cocktail Parties)* (1986-90), an ongoing performance in which Piper distributed cards with exceedingly polite rejoinders to white people on occasions they spoke racist remarks in her presence, failing to notice she was Black.[342]

Although each of these instances adheres in one respect or another to common devices of humour – such modes of incongruity as exaggeration, travesty, understatement –, it is clear that none of the instances means to be taken for a case of "just joking."[343] The laughter invited by fuck-you feminists is not that attending the pleasure of an incongruity in the Kantian sense – what the philosopher describes as a "strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing."[344] Kant's point is that we laugh when we feel ourselves abruptly released from an excessive commitment, say a commitment to the expectation that the articles in a humour situation will come to mean something worth understanding. In other words, we laugh when in the absurd outcome of a joke we feel ourselves suddenly shifted into a play space where no further exercise of reasonable expectation is required. The bodily sensation of the shift-to-nothing provokes laughter, says Kant; laughter does not arise from realizing that a joke enjoins us to adopt a new expectation.

Kant's limited conception of laughter does little to explain the amusement provoked by feminist joking. If the humour in the latter hinges on incongruity, it is located in the shock of an overthrow of the major by the marginal, which grants the pleasure of unexpected *amplification* in addition to reduction. "Nothing" – that which is found in the laugh realizing the superfluity of a

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[341] Osterweil, 324.
[342] Osterweil, 328. Piper later took exception to Osterweil's attribution of a "fuck you" intention in her work; see Adrian Piper, "As a Matter of Fact," *Artforum International* 55, no. 10 (Summer 2017): 67–68.
[343] Solanas, for one, meant her "joke" seriously enough to later attempt the assassination of Andy Warhol, a man.
[344] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161.

previous expectation – is not the remainder when humour is suffused with political activism. (In the sexist joke, on the other hand, a different kind of "nothing" is discovered in the punchline, notwithstanding the offense caused, due to the way in which the joker seeks to stabilize norms, to leave no-thing changed.) The effect of fuck-you feminist humour – its counteracting of power even more than its inducement to laughter – both depends on the temporal charge of surprise and anticipates further generations of thought and action. This humour means to leave matters unsettled, and to replenish commitments.

Fuck-you feminism is but one mode through which feminists draw strength from humour. For example, the "unruly woman" has been reclaimed as a humorous performative challenge to stereotypes around femininity, as in Kathleen Rowe's popular study.[345] Jo Anna Isaak has written of the pleasure of laughter as a power-shifting force in feminist art, citing the fringe positions from which women artists laugh as a strength, a show of commitment to "an ongoing activity of pluralizing, destabilizing, baffling any centered discourse."[346] Sheri Klein has noted the importance of humour to autobiography in feminist art, and to the address of difficult subject matter; for Klein, there is power both in the use of humour as a tool, and in the capacity that humour has to elicit laughing pleasure from an audience.[347] Scholars agree on the critical import of feminist humour, that its use by women artists always holds the potential to re-orient social and art-world power structures.[348] In this way, I would suggest, feminist humour usually retains

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[345] Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1995).

[346] Jo Anna Isaak, *Contemporary Women's Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, Re Visions (London, England) (London: Routledge, 1996), 4.

[347] Sheri Klein, "Comic Liberation: The Feminist Face of Humor in Contemporary Art," *Art Education* 61, no. 2 (March 2008): 47–52.

[348] See also, for a general source, Cynthia Willett, Julie Willett, and Yael D. Sherman, "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 217–46. Further sources on feminist humour in the art world include: Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, 1990; Tanya Mars, "Not Just For Laughs," in *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of*

some trace of *digging in*, staking a position and beckoning difference, even at its goofiest and most nonchalant.

ARTICULATE HUMOUR

The remainder of this chapter is about the *something* advanced by feminist humour in art, in other words the change it beckons. The notion that humour can change anything is not without controversy in humour studies. For example, Noël Carroll itemizes several of the perceived cognitive benefits of incongruous humour but nevertheless concludes, "it is difficult to come up with many examples of comic amusement leading to genuine concept revision."[349] Writing about Bakhtin's theory of carnival, that shibboleth of humour's capacity for upheaval, Umberto Eco argues the best such displays of comic unruliness can do is make us "feel the uneasiness of living under a law – any law."[350] The performance of carnival does not signal the law has been overthrown; in fact, the stability of the law is what makes the ritualized rule-breaking possible and indeed officially permitted by the ruling class.[351] A similar conservatism arguably lives at the heart of many efforts to use humour critically, such as instances of parody, where the

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Performance Art by Canadian Women (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004), 20–40; Debra Wacks, *SMIRK: Women, Art, and Humor* (Garden City, NY: Firehouse Art Gallery, Nassau Community College, 2001).

[349] Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 70.

[350] Umberto Eco, "Frames of Comic 'Freedom,'" in *Carnival!*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 8.

[351] See Aaron Gurevich, "Bakhtin and His Theory of Carnival," in *A Cultural History of Humour*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Polity Press, 1997), 54–60. Among the criticisms Gurevich levies against Bakhtin's notion of carnival is that it places undue emphasis on the secular, popular aspects of the ceremonies, absenting its fanatical Christian elements. Gurevich believes the carnival, sooner than pointing to a "popular culture" liberated from the Church, offers a striking picture of the multi-levelled medieval and Renaissance mindset, where contrasts of earthly joy and frenzied fear of damnation dueled and played out. Hence, "Not only joy and humour, not only festivity and popular relaxation, but also cruelty, hate and massacre could be the components of carnival" (56).

transgressive effect of ridiculing the authoritative text first asks that we accept the claim of this authority as in some sense "sacred or serious"[352] to our culture.

Put another way, humour is often something that reacts to the state of things, rather than suggesting any vital alterations to this state. Specific political values do not inhere in humour's movement. Nathaniel Hong phrases it in this way: "humor can be used both as a secondary reinforcement in the process of developing critical political consciousness [and] it can also be a surrogate for conflict that ultimately contributes to escapism and acquiescence."[353] As a "secondary reinforcement," humour can help to awaken political awareness, and orient us away from the ridiculed or laughably discredited object. Humour can be quite articulate about what needs challenging and changing, but how articulate is it in realizing the political demands to which it is appended? Furthermore, when humour introduces articulation into our hardened life circumstances, does it offer the mere appearance of a modified condition in place of real structural change? At what point, if we are serious about instituting new realities, should we depart with humour – when is the time to be flexible, and when to drive a wedge?

FEMINIST FAILURE AS ARTICULATION

My focus in the remaining chapter is second wave feminist art of roughly the 1960s and 70s, particularly early feminist performance and video art, and specifically the situation in California. I have purposely compiled factors of instability in this configuration: a nascent movement in feminism; a fledgling, underdeveloped medium; and the "looseness" of the west

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[352] William Hazlitt, "Lectures on the English Comic Writers [1818]," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 68.

[353] Nathaniel Hong, "Mow 'em All down, Grandma: The 'Weapon' of Humor in Two Danish World War II Occupation Scrapbooks," *Humor* 23, no. 1 (2010): 28.

coast as a cultural location relative to the more established, theory-driven art world in New York.

Regarding the latter, take Martha Rosler's remarks about California,

> [I] liked the fact that everything was provisional. They made up housing as they went along. The homes were made out of chicken wire and sprayed stucco, and everything just seemed ill thought out, which was great: cheap and not constrained by brick building and heavy traditions of the past. That is the main utopian element of California, and it worked for me.[354]

Speaking about West-East Bag, a feminist artists network active in the early 70s, Laura Cottingham notes the openness of the California chapter: "Southern California was more focused on pedagogy, more collaborative, less market oriented, and more encouraging of new media like performance, video, and installation works than the sister network in New York."[355] The ostensible differences between art practices on the two coasts are lightly mocked in Nancy Holt's videotape *East Coast, West Coast* (1969), where Holt and guest star Robert Smithson perform a dialogue in which they embody the stereotypical dispositions – roughly, intellectual vs. emotional – of New York and California artists, respectively.

This chapter addresses the California situation of early feminist video in order to highlight the risk and/of failure I see as central to feminism and its deployment of humour. Failure has a history in feminist thought. It is not always connected to such pleasure-inducing projects as humour. For example, Jack Halberstam has written of "shadow feminisms," which take "antisocial, anti-Oedipal, antihumanist, and counterintuitive" forms that disrupt the generational inheritance of feminism (the "mother-daughter" lineage that often reifies white, cishet feminisms), and that fail the teleology of the liberated subject. This is an (over)shadowed genealogy of queer, postcolonial, and Black feminisms – voiced by, among others, Saidiya

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[354] Quoted in Glenn Phillips, "MARTHA ROSLER [Interview]," in *California Video: Artists and Histories*, ed. Glenn Phillips (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 198.

[355] Laura Cottingham, "L.A. Womyn," in *Seeing through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art* (Australia: G+B Arts International, 2000), 164–65. See also Moira Roth, "A Star Is Born: Performance Art in California," *Performing Arts Journal* 4, no. 3 (1980): 87.

Hartman, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Saba Mahmood, and Heather Love[356] – marked by pain

rather than pleasure, failure rather than mastery; these feminisms articulate their political projects

"in the form of refusal."[357]

My intention in this chapter is not to collapse my humorous video examples with the

sense of failure in this feminist "shadow archive." There is a utopian idea at work in my analysis

which, however much it conduces to failure, may not be reconcilable with the politics of

passivity and refusal as articulated in the previous paragraph. If I do follow Halberstam,

however, it is in approaching failure as way of thinking about the question of feminist

generationality. How does the humorous failure in the white, second wave feminist tapes

examined below, if not disrupt or refuse the lineage of feminism-in-the-singular, at least perform

an openness to different articulations? What, in these cases, can be political about nonchalance?

There is a seeming complication in my argument. Even as I speak about the deliberate

forms that failure takes in my examples, I claim that their humour is also unyielding, that it digs

in and *really means* it. But what can this humour really mean under accepted, even embraced,

conditions of possible failure? Again, my sense is that there is a difference between the begging

off of much sexist humour (however initially cruelly intended) and the digging in of much

feminist humour as a critical practice, and I would argue that this difference is accountable in

terms of what is risked in either instance. I do not mean here that feminist humour risks more

because it has less guarantee of an audience sympathetic to its joking (though it will no doubt

face incomparable hostility). As I will show later, feminist humour of the second wave emerges

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[356] Relevant texts by these authors include Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).
[357] Judith [Jack] Halberstam, "Shadow Feminisms: Queer Negativity and Radical Passivity," in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 126.

from the establishment of increasingly solid communities and spaces for fellow feminist laughers, arguably more tightly knit and organized than the nation's innumerable, taken-for-granted factions of male chauvinists.[358] Rather, the risks of the feminist videos I look at below have to do with the acknowledgement of failure, the awareness that humour's destabilizing action can ramify not just outwardly but also inwardly. I take the openness of these videos, their senses of humour, to consist in the ways in which they negotiate failure as an internal principle without succumbing to escapism, that is, without forfeiting their struggle. By the end of this chapter, I hope to show that *really meaning it* with feminist humour can involve a concept of humourlessness that need not be fanatical, that digging in can be a way of leaving a trace rather than sticking to the spot.

FEMINIST HUMOUR IN EARLY VIDEO ART

My interest in the following section is to think about the utility of late 60s and early 70s Portapak video for feminist performance artists of the time, primarily looking at the scene in California, together with a consideration of the functionality humour had and continues to have for instigating laughter and critique in feminist art. Below I will analyze two well-known feminist performance tapes – Susan Mogul's *Take Off* (1974) and Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) – and examine how their individual approaches to humour reflect a feminist ethos and instantiate political critique. Further, with these somewhat shabby-looking black and white analogue tapes, filled with awkward pauses and dead air, I will take the opportunity to think through the logic of datedness, that is, the arguably intentional failure of these tapes to transcend the specific moments of their making. My goal is not necessarily to defend low-tech as

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[358] On the infrastructure of feminist media practice, see Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 15–17.

an aesthetic with qualities worth cherishing, or to redeem the "freshness" of the political humour of Mogul and Rosler (to prove they are as funny and relevant as ever), but rather to reconsider one of humour's challenges to art: functionality. If the functionality of humour is seen to depend on its novelty (a "stale" joke being one whose moment has come and gone), the more or less deliberate dual risk of feminist Portapak humour is that of creating in a mode and medium with the possibility of a failed future. Sooner than seeking the "last laugh," the videos discussed below might be seen to accept a process of provisional achievement, in awareness of an open, changed future.

PORTAPAK VIDEO

There is a joke that goes you can tell you're watching a piece of early performance video art when, at the end of the tape, the performer gets up to turn off the camera.[359] While this is a slight exaggeration, it points to the relative lack of production value in first-decade, single-take, lo-fi, black and white Portapak video, which can make performance videos of the period look "dated" by later tech-savvy standards.[360]

Early black and white Portapak video enjoyed a measure of success in the American art world that, then and now, seems unlikely. Forward-thinking galleries such as the Howard Wise in New York and the Long Beach Museum of Art in California embraced this consumer-grade technology soon after it emerged in the late 1960s, despite the fact that Portapak video delivered

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[359] The joke is attributed to video artist William Wegman, in Glenn Phillips, "INTRODUCTION," in *California Video: Artists and Histories*, ed. Glenn Phillips (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 5.

[360] Early models of the Portapak were released by Sony, Panasonic, Shibaden, Craig, Ampex, and Akai. A handy comparative table of the ins and outs, the pros and cons, of each of these models can be found in Michael Shamberg and Raindance Corporation, "Official Manual," in *Guerrilla Television* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 100–102. The authors also provide a detailed guide for buying, operating, and understanding Portapak equipment; comments are offered on the "psychological" and "physical" differences between film and video (22-32).

a less than glorious audiovisual presentation.[361] This is not merely to speak from personal

impressions of watching wobbly, hissing tapes of the period: artists and critics at the time

recognized that Portapak video was lousy, too. Many avant-garde filmmakers refused to work

with the format because of its substandard look.[362] Allan Kaprow regarded the bulk of

videotaped performance pieces as "more or less adequate recordings . . . which could have been

done just as well or better as film. Videotape is simply cheaper and faster."[363] This does not

mean that video was altogether "easier"; the video artist could expect to deal with a number of

faults in their equipment. Glenn Phillips observes that

> despite its revolutionary potential, the Portapak was a fussy machine. Unlike with film, in
> video it was difficult to make clean in-camera edits by stopping and restarting a recording
> – not only would the image usually distort and roll each time the recording was stopped,
> but the camera's microphone would record the sounds of the button being pressed. The
> camera performed poorly in low light levels, but it was also so sensitive to direct light
> that overexposure could permanently damage the machine. Therefore, the most
> successful early videos in California tended to be works that could be completed with a
> stationary camera, in a single take, and in a controlled lighting environment.[364]

Proponents of early experimental video admitted the limitations of Portapak and subsequent

equipment's low-definition images and rudimentary editing tools, interpreting these as necessary

alternatives to the slickness of television. In this respect, a fixed-camera thirty-minute lo-res tape

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[361] For more on earlier video art exhibitions, see Allison Simmons, "Introduction -- Television and Art: A Historical Primer for an Improbable Alliance," in *The New Television: A Public/Private Art*, ed. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1977), 11.

[362] See Laura Cottingham, "New Wine into Old Bottles: Some Comments on the Early Years of Video Art," in *Outer & Inner Space: Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, Jane & Louise Wilson, and the History of Video Art*, ed. Rosalie West (Richmond, VA: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), 6–7. Filmmaker Ken Jacobs suggests the reasons for avoiding video may have been as much financial as aesthetic: "The first video cameras were pricey—they weren't that inviting. I remember one thing that shocked me was their low resolution. Ralph Hocking ran a video center, a lab upstate, and in his work he consciously exploited video's 'low-res' rather than imitating film." Quoted in Flo Jacobs et al., "Roundtable on Digital Experimental Filmmaking," *October* 137 (2011): 52. Notable exceptions to the rule of avant-garde filmmakers avoiding early video include Shirley Clarke and Andy Warhol.

[363] Kaprow is here making a point about the lack of real "experimentation" with video; so far, writes Kaprow, performance video has by and large duplicated "theatrical arts" of the past, with technically inferior results. Allan Kaprow, "Video Art: Old Wine, New Bottle," in *The New Television: A Public/Private Art: Essays, Statements, and Videotapes Based on "Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television" Organized by Fred Barzyk, Douglas Davis, Gerald O'Grady, and Willard Van Dyke for the Museum of Modern Art, New York City*, ed. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1977), 94.

[364] Phillips, "INTRODUCTION," 5.

is not aesthetically crude so much as radically opposed to hyper-synthetic "television time."[365] Similarly, for artists such as John Baldessari, early video had the desired "artless" look to facilitate conceptual exercises.[366]

While aesthetic polish was no hallmark of analogue video, this did not prevent many artists and galleries from turning to the new technology to expand the field of modernist concern. In the most blatant instances, video was seized on as a cutting-edge way to practice formal abstraction. Artist Vanalyne Green tells an amusing story of her time as a feminist art student at CalArts in the early 1970s: "On my way to and from classes . . . I always passed the video editing rooms, and I always saw only men at the stations, and they were always making electronic paintings."[367] Other methods were used to erase the distance between video and modernism. As Martha Rosler has argued, galleries were quick to fashion and promote "video art" according to a "mystified" rationalization of video-specific form, cognition, and perception.[368] In many cases, video was the next step in the aesthetic line that had reached a seeming impasse in modernism. For example, artists like Dan Graham saw video as a way to

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[365] See Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 95–96. See also David Antin's extensive comments on the "boring" time of early video art, its clumsy editing processes, and its "cheesy" look. In some videotapes, these features can be figured parodically in relation to television standards. David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium," in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (Layton, Utah: G.M. Smith, Peregrine Smith Books, in association with Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), 147–66.

[366] Baldessari writes of his video *Ed Henderson Reconstructs Movie Scenarios* (1973): "[I] took a lot of photos off of the television and tried to be artless about it." (qtd. 123-4, *Lights, Camera, Art*). Quoted in Bettina Riccio Henry, *Lights, Camera, Art: John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha and Hollywood Film* (New York: City University of New York, 2006), 123–24.

[367] Vanalyne Green, "Vertical Hold: A History of Women's Video Art," in *Feedback: The Video Data Bank Catalog of Video Art and Artist Interviews*, ed. Kate Horsfield and Lucas Hilderbrand, Wide Angle Books (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 23. On the other hand, artist Hermine Freed proposes *conceptual* similarities between certain video works and abstract expressionist painting: these include video's investigations into psychology, focus on process, and "culmination" of the problem of temporality from ab-ex and Futurism. Hermine Freed, "Video and Abstract Expressionism," *Arts Magazine* 49 (December 1974): 67–69.

[368] Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture and the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), 79.

continue, while simultaneously imperiling, modernist notions of "immediacy" and "presence" by other means.[369]

Of course, women were not exempt from the practice of video in a modernist lineage. Lynda Benglis and Joan Jonas, to cite two artists, made tapes concerned primarily with video's specific form, rhythm, and materiality.[370] It is worth noting, however, that Benglis and Jonas' tapes were labelled "narcissistic" by Micki McGee in a 1981 issue of *Heresies*. By this, McGee did not mean that Benglis and Jonas had made themselves the sole subject of their videos, per the tendency of so many performance artists of the day, but that the formalist priority of these tapes effectively reified the artists' self-display, reproducing without critiquing the condition of narcissism to which women are culturally relegated. Narcissism, according to McGee, "results from a basic mechanism of women's oppression: the emphasis placed on women's appearance,"[371] and is therefore incompatible with feminism.

McGee's critique illustrates the extent to which an evacuation of modernism was seen as necessary to a feminist turn in art. While it is true in this time that North American art was widely abandoning modernist medium-purism with such tendencies as Pop, concept, and

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[369] Graham: "My video time-delay, installations, and performance designs use this modernist notion of phenomenological immediacy, foregrounding an awareness of the presence of the viewer's own perceptual process; at the same time they critique this immediacy by showing the impossibility of locating pure present tense." Quoted in Hal Foster et al., eds., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 564. Further, Richard Lorber argues "The dematerialized immediacy of the video monitor image and the medium's reflexive properties in live feedback systems have tended to make video art something of a 'final solution' for handling all the epistemological ironies (harking back to Duchamp) in the art of the last 10 years." Richard Lorber, "Epistemological TV," *Art Journal* 34, no. 2 (Winter -1975 1974): 132. For more on the ways in which video art self-defined along lines of "immediacy," see William Kaizen, *Against Immediacy: Video Art and Media Populism* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2016), 16–20. For an argument that video's "heterogeneity" effectively "defeated" modernist medium specificity, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post- Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 30–32.
[370] Tapes of this description arguably include Benglis' *Document* (1972), *On Screen* (1972), and *Now* (1973); and Jonas' *Left Side/Right Side* (1972) and *Vertical Roll* (1972).
[371] Micki McGee, "Narcissism, Feminism, and Video Art," *Heresies* 3/4, no. 12 (1981): 88. For an alternate reading of Jonas' video *Vertical Roll* as a feminist take on "subject constitution," see Krista Geneviève Lynes, *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits: Feminism in a Globalized Present*, First edition, Global Cinema (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10–12.

intermedia art, feminist art was in the further position of being attached to a growing, organized

political body of which art-making was only one, however vital, organ. If modernism in the

Greenbergian model had worked to secure its autonomy by liberating the mediums of art from

such dependencies as representation (art's essential "functionalism" defined as purification

towards "the most efficacious, efficient, economical employment of the medium for purposes of

aesthetic value"[372]), feminist art could little afford to align itself with such a purist program, not

to mention one dominated by male artists in the lonely-genius mold. Feminist art by and large

did not seek to escape representation but to instrumentalize and deconstruct it in new ways, to

give specification not to art's medium and aesthetic value but rather its social and political

content. For this reason, Barbara Rose has characterized the moment of second wave feminist art

as a push against cultural gatekeeping: "The real change [at this time] is not in *forms* of art, but

in the *function* of art and the *role* of the artist in society, which poses an absolute threat to the

existence of critical authority."[373] The move to locate art's function primarily in the content of

works rather than their form explains why Griselda Pollock and others have argued that

feminism in art was not merely about fair museum representation for women artists (though this

was certainly a crucial part of art activism at the time), but moreover "a struggle about meanings,

a fight against dominant and established systems of meaning and the positions and identities

which they attempt to secure."[374] Feminist art movements worked to establish that women's lives

– not merely their interior experience, from which the solitary modern artist was always expected

[372] Clement Greenberg, "Detached Observations," *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 4 (December 1976): 88.
[373] Chris Hill, "Attention! Production! Audience!: Performing Video in Its First Decade," in *REWIND: A Guide to Surveying the First Decade: Video Art and Alternative Media in the U.S., 1968-1980*, ed. Abina Manning and Brigid Reagan (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2008), 21.
[374] Griselda Pollock, "Feminism and Modernism," in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-85*, ed. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London; New York: Pandora, 1987), 118.

to draw genius and inspiration, but also women's material, everyday circumstances – could be the meaningful content of artworks.

PORTAPAK PERFORMANCE

Available to artists starting in the mid-1960s, Portapak video's emergence roughly coincided with second wave feminist activities in America. It is often said that women artists embraced video because it was a medium unburdened with prior (male) art-historical associations. A less appreciated reason, argues Anja Osswald, is that video was a medium with a basis in television, hence, a crucial starting place from which to launch a critique of women's representation in mass media.[375] Again, this meant a disruption of modernist-style medium exploration in favour of investigations into mediums as socially practiced, politically loaded discourses. Indeed the videotapes of Susan Mogul and Martha Rosler I will come to later can each be read as engaging parodically with the rhetorics of television.[376]

One practice of Portapak video in which feminist artists made exemplary contributions was that of taped performance. Besides the widespread tendency to capture/document live performance events on video, a vast store of artist tapes from the late 60s and early 70s consist of performance pieces done *for* video, often involving only the artist and the camera. Performance video was not the exclusive province of feminist artists, but feminism undoubtedly transformed

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[375] Anja Osswald, "Body Talk(s)," in *Stedelijk Collectie Reflecties*, ed. Jan van Adrichem and Adi Martis (Amsterdam; Rotterdam: Stedelijk Museum; nai010 publishers, 2012), 587.

[376] Kim Levin, for example, takes both Mogul and Rosler as parodists of TV, in line with a predilection of west coast video art. Levin writes that "Susan Mogul's tapes *Take Off* and *Dressing Up*, both overflowing with vulgarity, are like commercials gone berserk. In the first, parodying Acconci, she alternate inane sales talk with demonstrations of a vibrator and a repeated chanted refrain; in the second, she chats about sales, discounts, and famous-make brands while munching peanuts and clumsily getting dressed in her bargains." Kim Levin, "Video Art in the TV Landscape: Notes on Southern California," in *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, A Dutton Paperback Original (New York: Dutton, 1978), 69. Levin's article has the detriment of downplaying the feminist overtones of Mogul and Rosler's tapes.

this practice, as indeed feminism rerouted much art world activity during this period.[377] Chris

Straayer has noted how video granted women artists unprecedented control and privacy, giving

them freedom to articulate highly personal performances on tape.[378]

This freedom was not easily won, however. Amidst rapid changes to the art world in the

1960s, feminist artists had to contend with hierarchies in burgeoning forms of art such as video,

never mind those belonging to centuries-old art tradition. Video gained a foothold in the art

world around the late 60s, which is to say at a moment when androcentric masochism was a

privileged mode of American performance and body art. Art critic Lucy Lippard humorously

encapsulates this period as one in which "Bruce Nauman was 'Thighing,' Vito Acconci was

masturbating, Dennis Oppenheim was sunbathing and burning, and Barry Le Va was slamming

into walls."[379] Nauman and Acconci were two early responders to video and utilized the

Portapak to capture some of their performances.[380]

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[377] Melinda M. Barlow encapsulates the time: "By 1972, feminism had trickled into the mainstream and was gathering force in conferences, caucuses, collectives, alternative spaces, protests, and publications of all kinds. In that year Helen Reddy's pop feminist anthem 'I Am Woman' topped the charts and two years before that a portrait of author and filmmaker Kate Millet by veteran painter Alice Neel had graced the cover of *Time* magazine. One year after Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro founded the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, 1972 was the year Chicago, Schapiro, and twenty-one of their students created a collaborative art environment exploring female experience in a condemned mansion in Los Angeles and called it *Womanhouse*. Other important collective endeavors appeared the same year: following the model of the Women's Interart Center in New York (1970), galleries featuring women's work were founded in New York (A.I.R.) and Los Angeles (Womanspace); women picketed the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, for excluding women artists from its 1971 biennial and also organized the first conference on Women in the Visual Arts at the Corcoran School of Art; the College Art Association established the Women's Caucus for Art; Women Make Movies was founded in New York to teach film production to neighborhood women; and *Feminist Art Journal, Ms.* magazine, and *Women and Film* published their first issues." Melinda M. Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival, 1972-1980," *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 3 (2003): 11. For a useful summary of the feminist art movement, see Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Matthews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (September 1987): 326–257. See also Lucy R. Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," *Art Journal* 40, no. 1/2 (Autumn - Winter 1980): 362–65.
[378] Chris Straayer, "I Say I Am: Feminist Performance Video in the '70s," *Afterimage* 13, no. 4 (1985): 8–12. See also Martha Gever, "The Feminism Factor: Video and Its Relation to Feminism," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture and the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), 226–41.
[379] Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 125.
[380] Nauman loaned out a Portapak from the Leo Castelli Gallery to make such tapes as *Wall/Floor Positions* (1968), *Stamping in the Studio* (1968), and *Bouncing in the Corner No. 1* (1968) and *No. 2* (1969). Acconci's early performance videos include *Sounding Board* (1970), *Centers* (1971), and *Association Area* (1971).

Jayne Wark has argued key differences between these masochistic performers and the body-centred performances delivered by feminist artists:

> when performance artists like Acconci or Chris Burden explored such concepts as power relations, risk, and vulnerability, they did so from a social position always already certain of its own power and authority and thus oblivious to what it might be like for those whose own social positions were defined by subordination and real powerlessness. These social inequities, and the ideologies that sustained them, were precisely the focus of feminist artists.[381]

Among the important developments feminist performers effected was to integrate autobiographical and narrative elements into performances. This development might be figured roughly as a product of the "consciousness-raising," the sharing of the personal as a political act, advocated by such second wave feminist groups as the Redstockings and New York Radical Women.[382] In feminist work, what were once abstract art themes took on meanings rooted in the life experiences of the artist, connected to a broader program of critique and struggle against specific social-political conditions.[383]

It is worth emphasizing again what makes this shift in practice relatively distinctive in the history of art. To explain by way of a familiar anecdote: In the early 70s, feminist artist Faith Wilding took exception when Allan Kaprow, father of the Happening (which is often credited, along with Jackson Pollock's action painting, as a progenitor of performance art), recommended to Wilding that "sweeping the floor" could be a ritualized art act. Kaprow's remark, argued

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[381] Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 90.

[382] Many reasons for the turn to performance in feminist art have been offered. They include: video's lack of territorialization by male artists; video's immediacy; and its relative objectlessness. Wark concludes, "If in the end we cannot isolate any singular explanation for feminist artists attraction to performance, we can perhaps more profitably argue at least that feminism and performance art became so inextricably linked because of the important contributions women were able to make to contemporary art practice through their involvement in performance. By making performance so conducive to their critical and political objectives, feminist artists were able to do what others had not – that is, to initiate a radically innovative practice that reengaged the aesthetic and the social after a long period of neo-Kantian autonomy and depoliticization." Wark, 36.

[383] This is not to say that all feminist performance work was created equal. See, for example, Martha Rosler's remarks about "pseudo-ritualized" feminist performance, which follows abstract expressionism in its avoidance of "willed content," however much it diverges from ab-ex in the nature of its fashioning of "private myth." Martha Rosler, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California," *Artforum*, September 1977, 70.

Wilding, disregarded the history of oppressive associations such a mundane task had for women. If for Kaprow and his ilk, the main thing was to expand the sphere of aesthetics into all parts of life, for Wilding, and many other feminist artists, the point was to effect social change by enacting a confrontation between art and the problems in the life of the artist, staging mundane performance "as political protest . . . rather than as an exploration of ritual form."[384]

I can only fail to do justice here to the full range of feminist performance activities initiated by Wilding and her contemporaries in the 1960s and 70s. The crucial performance works of this era have been chronicled in such sources as *The Amazing Decade*, edited by Moira Roth with a focus on American works; Jayne Wark's *Radical Gestures*, which broadens the scope to include Canadian work; Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked*; and Rebecca Schneider's *The Explicit Body in Performance*.[385] In addition, Shana MacDonald has charted an interdisciplinary course through feminist avant-garde film and its relations to performance in this vital period of activity, and beyond.[386] My present interest is in focusing on examples of early feminist performance *video* – specifically, in considering how the rough-and-ready Portapak was taken up as a political tool by feminist artists, and in different ways, invested with a performative humour that meaningfully disrupted received notions about how art should look, sound, and mean. It is my feeling that the Portapak, performance art, and humour represent a special configuration of elements in second wave feminist art that exposes the works in this configuration to various kinds of failure. The willingness to risk this failure is, I will argue, endemic to the feminist

[384] Straayer, "I Say I Am: Feminist Performance Video in the '70s," 8.
[385] Moira Roth, ed., *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983); Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006); Peggy Phelan, *Umarked: The Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993); Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997).
[386] Shana Danielle Elizabeth MacDonald, "Between Frames: Feminist Experimental Media 1960-2010" (Dissertation, York University, 2013).

project and is one of the many reasons feminism and the production of humour seem aptly suited to one another.

TWO FEMINIST PORTAPAK TAPES

Susan Mogul's *Take Off* is a Portapak performance made in 1974 during Mogul's enrolment in the Feminist Studio Workshop in Los Angeles. *Take Off* is a parody of Vito Acconci's *Undertone*, a tape made on Portapak the year prior. Mogul produced her video as a response to Acconci while writing a class paper on the differences in the way men and women artists represent their sexuality. To acquaint the reader with Acconci's piece: for the duration of *Undertone*'s thirty-four minutes, Acconci sits across from the fixed camera with his hands beneath a table, delivering a monologue in which he alternately imagines that a girl under the table is groping him, and that he is groping himself. He repeatedly intones: "I want to believe there's no one here under the table . . . I want to believe there's a girl here." Acconci mingles these phrases with instructions to the viewer on how best to act in order to sustain the balance of performer-spectator control Acconci desires.[387]

Mogul's *Take Off* is less mystified as a conceptual stunt. The video starts with Mogul entering to sit at a table, across from the camera; with her hands concealed beneath the table and her head bowed in mock-Acconci masturbatory concentration, she begins to recite her version of the *Undertone* mantra: "There isn't a man under the table. There isn't a woman under the table. It's only my vibrator . . . and it's crawling up my leg." Mogul suddenly snaps out of her meditative state and brings the vibrator (whose loud buzz we've been hearing all this time) out

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[387] For a critique of the "trap logic" of Acconci's performances, see Stephen Melville, "How Should Acconci Count for Us?: Notes on a Retrospect," *October* 18 (Autumn 1981): 79–89. "[Acconci] is always the man at the end of the night wharf inviting your blackmail, or on the operating table with his pimpled ass in the air, demanding your decision upon it, his penis, his fantasies, his self. It is you that will give him his self, his reason for being there; and the relations between you (between, that is, you and him) are always explicit, contractual" (80).

from under the table. "I want to tell you about this vibrator," Mogul says in cheerful direct

address to the camera. It was a going-away present Mogul received from her friends; with this

vibrator, Mogul was able to achieve her first masturbatory orgasm – "It was *really* great," she

notes with a goofy smile. The video continues in an alternating pattern between passages of light,

candid monologue and Acconci-style under-table masturbation. One session with the vibrator is

interrupted when the device's batteries begin to run low. Mogul admits with a laugh that this

isn't her "true" vibrator but a ninety-nine-cent model that makes louder noise (better for the

video), but has a shorter battery life. Mogul produces the actual vibrator she's been talking about,

and returns to her onanistic meditations. "There isn't a man under the table. There isn't a woman

under the table. It's only my vibrator, and it's stimulating between my legs and my clitoris" –

say, while we're on the topic of batteries, Mogul wants to tell you that this vibrator was very

expensive: she used thirty batteries on it (Mogul dumps a bagful of them on the table) in just

three months! Now, where were we? As the video progresses, it takes demonstrably more effort

for Mogul to transition from deeply concentrated masturbation to nonchalant monologue. She

makes increasing show of shaking off the heady bliss of the vibrator before directly addressing

the camera; her monologue also begins to develop more hitches, absent-minded "ums." The

video ends with Mogul in the midst of an intense, prolonged session with the vibrator, barely

able to utter the Acconci-style phrases.

    Take Off registers both as a lark, with Mogul's candid confessions and slightly affected

naivete, and as a rejoinder to Acconci's art-world theatricality, narcissism, and none too amusing

sexism.[388] "[I]nstead of making a serious intellectual video art work like Acconci," Mogul says,

"I created a cheerful, practical HOW TO DO IT video. Not only has my work confronted sexual

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[388] On *Take Off* in relation to the sexist power dynamics of Acconci, see Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 172. Wark quotes Acconci's own retrospective admission that his work was "really sexist."

identity. It has also confronted art world conventions. It is rather subtle in *Take Off*."[389] The

tape's function is thus placed near the forefront of Mogul's concern: her piece operates both

instructionally and critically. The spectator can take away something practically useful from

Take Off; it's not just artist masturbation (though it is that, too).

Mogul's video is engagingly direct in conception and in execution – single-take, fixed

camera, monologue-driven – as are many of her other videos of the period. For example, in

Dressing Up (1973), Mogul performs a nonchalant reverse striptease as she relates stories about

shopping excursions and snacks loudly on corn nuts (as it turns out, these are both rituals related

to her mother). A 1976 *Artforum* review of Mogul's videos praises the amusing juxtaposition of

her extroverted chatter and her use of "deadpan" backgrounds. By the end of the article,

however, the reviewer can't help dispensing advice on how Mogul might tighten up the awkward

pauses in her delivery and tamp down her at times "overbearing" Jewish ethnicity.[390]

To critique the unvarnished quality of Mogul's Portapak performances is to fail to

appreciate the context from which these videos emerged. Mogul produced her early videos in the

west coast feminist art scene, first in Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's short-lived Feminist

Art Program at CalArts (a school that had purchased twenty-six Portapaks for its arts programs

in 1970), and then as a student of the Feminist Studio Workshop, which Chicago and others

founded and relocated to the Los Angeles Woman's Building in late 1973. Speaking about her

time at the Woman's Building, Mogul recalls the spirit of support and fearlessness that

surrounded art making in this collaborative space: "We were encouraged to be very public. There

wasn't this concept of waiting until you were ready when your work was polished. Being in the

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[389] Susan Mogul, "Investigating Myself: Confessions of the Real Susan Mogul" (National Documentary Film Conference, Zurich University of the Arts, Zurich, Switzerland, 2011), http://www.susanmogul.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2011_Zurich_Univ_-Lecture_Mogul.pdf.
[390] Leo Rubinfien, "Susan Mogul; Anthology Film Archive, New York; Exhibit," *Artforum* 15 (December 1976): 65.

Feminist Studio Workshop was all about moving out into the world."[391] To give an example of

the artist productivity to come out of this environment, the Woman's Building's video archive,

now held at the Getty Research Institute (the Woman's Building closed in 1991), comprises over

350 tapes made under the auspices of the Building, in a variety of modes – documentary,

narrative, performance, and many stops in between.[392]

By the age of twenty-four, Mogul was making videos and giving presentations on her

work away from the Woman's Building. She has stated that she learned she could make people

laugh only after screening her video *Dressing Up* to a receptive audience. That there is

something funny about her practice is not fully apparent to the artist herself at the point of

inception, but rather revealed through an open exploration of available tools and performance

modes, and above all from a willingness to "go public" with her process as an artist.[393]

Obviously this describes a familiar tale of what it is like to be a student artist: discovering

oneself in the process of experimentation at the level of both production and exhibition. Art

school is treated as a laboratory for ideas, as an apprenticeship on the way to forming an identity.

Portapak seems an exemplary technology for students taking their first uncertain steps towards

expression. Linked up with the spirit of the feminist art movement, however, Mogul's videos

take on the added significance of venturing a way women artists might speak (say, with

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[391] Quoted in Alexandra Juhasz, "Susan Mogul," in *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 187.

[392] Artist Jerri Allyn on the video art collection at the Woman's Building: "It sounds strange now, but then . . . everything was important. That was part of the feminist ethos. Everything was political and everything was important. So that's what got put into the collection – everything. It is the student work from the Feminist Studio Workshop, art video by all sorts of people who worked or had shows at the Woman's Building. It's the public service announcements we did, plus all the documentation of the events – the performances, the readings. There is probably a lot of unedited footage, because we documented everything – even things like moving in and painting the walls, because that was important, too." Quoted in Meg Cranston, "EVERYTHING'S IMPORTANT: A Consideration of Feminist Video in the Woman's Building Collection," in *California Video: Artists and Histories*, ed. Glenn Phillips (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 269. See also Cecilia Dougherty, "Stories from a Generation: Video Art at the Woman's Building," in *From Site to Vision: The Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture* (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 286–308.

[393] Juhasz, "Susan Mogul," 188.

"overbearing" extroversion) and, crucially, joke around in their work. A few years later, Mogul could be found on tape openly questioning how long her success as an artist could last, and mulling a career change into stand-up comedy, with her video *Big Tip, Back Up, Shut Out* (1976) serving as an awkward dry run.

Before I move any further with remarks about Mogul's work, I would like to present a different example of feminist performance video. Though she also came up through a west coast art education in the 1970s, Martha Rosler in many ways departs from Susan Mogul in her approach to art. For one, the political content of Rosler's work is explicitly founded in structural critique. As Jayne Wark explains, Rosler was critical of the "cultural feminist" ethos of the Woman's Building, feeling "the objective of feminism ought not to be the valorization of personal fantasies, nor the establishment of alternative institutions, nor the prioritizing of gender over class or race but rather a struggle to redress the ideological and socio-economic bases of power hierarchies across the culture and its institutions as a whole."[394] One could say there is an increased political conceptualization behind Rosler's ideas and techniques. In such major video works of the 1970s as *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977), Rosler deploys self-conscious distantiating techniques in her camera-placement and narration. Furthermore, she has often spoken about the political valences of her work in such leftist academic journals as *October*.

One might gather from the above that Rosler represents a didactic, mirthless feminism in her videos. However, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, perhaps Rosler's most famous video, is a staple of humorous feminist video retrospectives. Here, Rosler makes a deliberate choice to shoot in what she calls the "lousy" Portapak format. Looking back on the tape, she says: "I knew very well how to edit. I knew very well how to do A and B rolling. I knew how to use a colour

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[394] Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 67. See also Rosler, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California."

camera. I knew how to use a studio, but I didn't care about any of that stuff . . . Black and white,

Portapak, what the hell. I was interested in the idea."[395]

Like Mogul's *Take Off*, Rosler's tape assumes the formal guise of a "how to." The mise-

en-scène of this tape resembles that of a Julia Child-inspired cooking show.[396] In a friend's loft

kitchen, Rosler wears an apron and stands behind a table reciting a vocabulary of common

kitchen items in a "New York deadpan" style, moving from A to Z through the alphabet. As she

names each item, she demonstrates its usage, her gestures becoming increasingly mechanical and

aggressive. A humorous incongruity arises between the simultaneous violence and composure of

Rosler's tutorial; her demonstrations are exaggerated of action and understated of voice. The

final U-V-W-X-Y-Z of this performance Rosler spells out with her arms, clutching a fork and a

large knife in either hand. She finishes by slashing a "Z" in the air with a Zorro flourish, then

puts down the utensils, crosses her arms, and shrugs.

Of the tape, Rosler has said: "Her not leaving [the kitchen] isn't meant as definitive. The

tape presents a moment of expression; it isn't saying, 'This is for all time nothing but passive and

pessimistic.'"[397] Rosler's shrug should not be read as a sign of resignation (even if, Rosler says,

it "minimizes the degree of power and aggression she has displayed"[398]), but one of willful

detachment. Such a distinction is significant to the humorous effect of the piece. Humour may

famously rely for its laughter upon the *inflexibility* of human motions and attitudes (Rosler's

kitchen demonstrations are textbook Bergson automatisms[399]); however, this does not result in

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[395] Quoted in MOCA, "Martha Rosler – Semiotics of the Kitchen – West Coast Video Art - MOCAtv," YouTube Video, 11:25, November 12, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDUDzSDA8q0.
[396] Another humorous feminist video with Julia Child flair is Suzanne Lacy's *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* (1976).
[397] Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," *October* 17 (Summer 1981): 86.
[398] Weinstock, 86.
[399] For Henri Bergson, laughter in instances of humour has an essentially corrective function. What begs correcting in humour situations is the "mechanical encrusted on the living," or the automatization of what should be vital and fluid – namely, the human organism. Important to the critical effect of laughter is that sympathy and identification

the rendering of a fixed verdict on human destiny. John Morreall notes that one of the main

differences between comedy and tragedy proper is that, in comedy, characters are not imprisoned

by fate.[400] This is to suggest that the sufferings of comedy are more likely to be social than

cosmic; hence comedy's problems are potentially flexible, solvable, if not within a comic work

itself, then in the human world outside. What humour arguably affords is an analytical view of

the world through the provision of what Simon Critchley calls an "oblique phenomenology" of

real world conditions.[401] By making something laughable of her kitchen lesson, Rosler shows

herself reduced as a human being within an absurd, mechanical, and, most of all, gendered role

(a forced kitchen performance; a Butlerian "legacy of sedimented acts"[402]); but at the same time

she implies that this role, being laughable, cannot totally subjugate her. The aggression of her

gestures enlarges the implication that Rosler is not a victim, not totally. Says Rosler,

> Resistance is still there, and I've seen this tape function in a liberating way for audiences
> of women. They laugh, and they recognize the logic of an aggression which is unfocused
> and undirected. She's not a victim in the sense of someone crushed. She's still there at the
> end, stuck to the spot, no further brutalized than at the beginning.[403]

The shrug at the end of the tape is both nonchalant and defiant, a double-attitude that positions

Rosler, or the woman she plays, in proximity to the audience's own laughing remove from the

pain suggested by every stabbing and slashing motion in Rosler's performance.

Why not a laugh, even a smile, instead of a shrug from Rosler to complete this tape?

What could prevent Rosler from sharing this potential audience response, including it as a

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with its (frequently human) object be suspended, if only temporarily; laughter, in the Bergson view, acts like an intuition that some behaviour is not worth the emotional investment, is laughable because it needs correcting. See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Dover, 2005).

[400] See John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour* (Chichester, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 78–83.

[401] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 20.

[402] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore; London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 274.

[403] Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," 86.

performance element (aside from, one presumes, Rosler's lack of impulse to laugh)? In reply to

this question it is not sufficient to restate the common belief – underwriting some "superiority"

theories of laughter – that a humorous effect depends on the making of something *unwittingly*

laughable – in other words, that it is difficult to laugh *at* something if it laughs *with* you. It may

be true that Rosler needs to take her role seriously in order for her audience to see it as laughable.

Yet this is not to suggest that taking a role seriously is equivalent to taking it unwittingly.

Seriousness here acts like a bracketing of laughable conditions for a straight-faced lesson; the

tape is playful but ultimately didactic. One guesses that Rosler might reduce the seriousness of

her tape with a "last laugh" in more ways than one. Not only might it "break" the character that

Rosler has established in the tape; a last laugh could also subtly discredit Rosler's commitment

to what I'd like to call the lesson of laughability: that the working out of humour's meanings and

imperatives may begin with laughter, but is not consummated by it. Rosler's shrug seems to be

her way of leaving off, indicating she is through with the lesson/performance, without thereby

resolving the performance in something so knowing as a laugh.[404]

The self-described "New York deadpan" of Rosler's performance is another important

aspect of the didactic humour of her piece. Deadpan as a performance mode can be said to

operate under the ironic suggestion that the performer is incapable of seeing the humour in what

she says or does (or further still, that she is incapable of laughter – is utterly humourless), but at

the same time has shown herself eminently capable of the art of distance-from-affection which

arguably affords one a humorous view of things. To be deadpan might mean to be improbably

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[404] This is not to downplay the importance that laughter has had in feminist theory; I am only interpreting what Rosler's choice not to laugh after this particular demonstration might mean. For more on feminist laughter, see Anca Parvulescu, "Feminism, or 'She's Beautiful and She's Laughing,'" in *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010), 101–18. The laughter of "delight" – "an instant of radical openness that explodes the teleological tendencies of interpretation" – is figured in relation to feminism by Catherine Conybeare, *The Laughter of Sarah: Biblical Exegesis, Feminist Theory, and the Concept of Delight* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 8.

sophisticated or improbably dull. It is not the same as performed naivete (say, of the Susan

Mogul variety), nor is it like cheekiness, because it implies something impervious, not merely

innocent or rebellious, in the performer's disposition. By the descriptor "New York" I assume

Rosler means her deadpan to show cool sophistication as well as big-city toughness. Like her

shrug, it indexes willful detachment from her role in the kitchen, playing upon an incongruity

between Rosler's disinclination to be expressive and the forms of accommodation and emotional

display expected of the stereotypical housewife.

HAZARDOUS REVERSALS

> I'm boring myself with these reversals (feminist hazard).
> – Maggie Nelson[405]

Earlier in this chapter I made a claim that humour is usually a reaction to things as they

are rather than an imaginative proposal for a new state of affairs. This may account for why

humour tends to deflate the more it is repeated, the less vulnerable we are to the surprise reversal

or incongruity sprung on us by a joke. In this way, humour seems to betray its limits as a

political strategy. One could argue that in the Mogul and Rosler videos, the humorous effect

hinges on a reversal of expectation for how women should (stereo)typically behave themselves.

In order to cue the audience's awareness of humour, then, the artist *depends* upon a plausibly

stable notion of what counts for the "typical" or "common" for women, which the artist will then

subvert. D. Diane Davis makes a case against such subversive humour: "Subversion is a problem

because it remains inscribed within the same binary structure it aims to dethrone. To subvert is to

play by the rules of the system to be subverted. It traps feminism within a circle of re-action; a

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[405] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), 44.

circle without futurity."[406] I would suggest that such a trap is avoided by Mogul and Rosler – that within their Portapak parodies is room for a future. This is due to the nature of their respective performances of self and medium, which, I argue, retain a sense of humour about unfinished, in-process expression. If part of the humour of Mogul and Rosler consists in a reactive dependence on presiding stereotypes, can you blame the performers for committing only the time and energy of a "moment" to their jests? To put it another way, should we not desire that their parodic performances will someday fail to draw laughs? Do the performers not, in some way, acknowledge this future, and greet it with the same shrug with which, under a different valence, they flout stereotypes?

(Image 5: *Take Off*)   (Image 6: *Semiotics of the Kitchen*)

What I am arguing for is the importance of *delivery*, not just content, to these humorous performances. I am aware of the irony of this position, since it appears to suggest, through the consonant term "delivery," that *medium* is a primary concern for these artists, when it is the opposite I have been contending at many points in this chapter. Insofar as medium matters to Mogul and Rosler, it is through its *openness* to facilitating the artist's exercise, as open as the

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[406] D. Diane Davis, *Breaking up (at) Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*, Rhetorical Philosophy and Theory (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 164. For a pro-subversion position on feminist humour, which centres subversion around joking at women's shared experiences rather than subverting men, see Janet Bing, "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?," *Women and Language* 27, no. 1 (2004): 22–33.

artist is to making use of the medium. Hence, in second wave feminist activities, hang-ups about

medium are less common than a willingness to try various mediums – whatever works for one's

idea. Again, take Rosler's comments:

> Video was good for cheap, crummy-looking moving images. They were like movies made on the cheap out of toilet paper, which, therefore, could not be judged by the normal aesthetic standards. The same way performance could not be judged by theatrical standards, video could not be judged by the standards of cinema. Most importantly, it was easily duplicated and transmissible by mail, and, therefore, it could evade the commodity fetishes of the moment and simply be a work. So it was a moment in a dialogue, or a discourse, I should say.[407]

I would suggest that the – willful – lack of preciousness about Portapak video is itself a form of

humorous delivery. If feminist art has a history of treating mediums as "moments in a dialogue,"

all the more reason to expect wit and humour to present themselves. That is another way of

saying that feminist art looks to remain articulate (despite any apparent inarticulateness in its

address), or located in the point of flexibility or fluidity, following Lewis Hyde's concept of

articulation. Humour is just this point of fluidity that allows the artist to slip the "trap of mere

opposition,"[408] to quote Hyde, since it suggests the artist has the resources to stage contradictions

without falling into a paralyzed negativity, a one-way approach.

FAILURE AS FEMINISM

> Feminism . . . must resist the impulse to reproduce only what it thinks it already knows; it must challenge the compulsion to repeat. This kind of feminism is one that cannot be owned; its rearticulation does not mean that it has suffered and grown weak. Rather, it is a feminism that can be radically refunctioned in the present, which means that its past is always and by necessity incomplete.[409]
>   – Robyn Wiegman

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[407] Phillips, "MARTHA ROSLER [Interview]," 200.
[408] Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 274.
[409] Robyn Wiegman, "What Ails Feminist Criticism? A Second Opinion," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 371–72.

In light of the forgoing discussion of Mogul and Rosler's tapes, I would like to venture a comparison between humour and Portapak video as "technologies" that function for the time being, that get the job done, so to speak. Both humour and Portapak can be associated with a "moment of expression" that "isn't meant to be definitive," which Rosler assigns as a logic to *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. By all appearances, humour is difficult to separate from the gambit of the momentary; it works most effectively when it is surprising, novel. So why would one be foolish enough to put it in art, which has operated for so long on the tragic, eternal plane? Furthermore, why would one put this act of humour on low-resolution videotape – defiantly, in Rosler's case?

It may not be wholly appropriate to align Mogul and Rosler's videos with the premeditated performative failure that, for example, Sarah Jane Bailes has analyzed in contemporary experimental theatre groups, where failure is consciously deployed as a strategy to upset the logic of representational mastery and continuity in performance.[410] I do, however, think it is worth considering these humorous Portapak performances as non-definitive, subject-to-fail expressions – or at least as works that take a "confrontational stance" towards standards of art-making and expectations placed on women, and risk failure by dint of their means and modes. When Susan Mogul creates a lighthearted parody of a Vito Acconci Portapak tape, in a way she tethers the work *to* Acconci and his context, potentially limiting its reach into posterity, not to mention damaging her reputation among Acconci acolytes. When Martha Rosler shrugs at the end of her lo-fi demonstration of cooking weaponry, she seems to say, "Hey, I've said my piece,

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[410] Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011). Consider in this light Laura U. Marks' conception of video art erotics and haptic visuality, where the use of low-fi, "poetically grainy" video images registers as a "feminist visual *strategy*" against the mastery of high-definitional visibility, replacing it with a tactile, embodied form of seeing that dwells (erotically) in spaces of representational failure. Laura U. Marks, "Video Haptics and Erotics," *Screen* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 331–48.

what more do you want from me?" As humorous expressions, these videos serve vital functions

in their moments (they are, after all, both "how-to" demonstrations), but do not thereby pursue

perpetuity as art or political objects.[411]

After all, it is the move away from dependence on "stable" definitions that seems crucial

to feminism, especially as it evolves out of the second wave of the 1960s and 70s.[412] Peggy

Phelan writes of the shift in the 1980s to a critique of the "essentialism" that marks certain

second wave feminist activities, which sought to *define* women in their difference from men, for

example, by locating the fundamentally "feminine" in art.[413] A well-known controversy in this

respect was the phenomenon of "central core imagery" (read: ostensibly vaginal forms) in the

work of women artists, as famously defined and practiced by the influential Judy Chicago and

Miriam Schapiro.[414] The drive for self-definition of the category "woman" was also criticized

within and after the second wave for centering only a limited sector of women's experiences; at

this time, in the judgment of artist Ana Mendieta, "American feminism is basically a white

middle class movement."[415] Together with artists Kazuko Miyamoto and Zarina, Mendieta

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[411] That they survive at all to be analyzed by me could be credited to social-historical impulses and not predominantly art-historical ones. One of the achievements of feminist art is to inextricably entwine these impulses.
[412] For more on the turn towards internal critique in feminism, see Nancy Fraser, "Multiculturalism, Antiessentialism, and Radical Democracy: A Genealogy of the Current Impasse in Feminist Theory," in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 173–88.
[413] Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Phelan and Helena Reckitt (New York: Phaidon, 2001), 37. For an attack on essentialism, see Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1981). A more measured response, advocating for a wait-and-see, non-prescriptive approach to feminist art, is Silvia Bovenschen, "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?," trans. Beth Weckmueller, *New German Critique* 10 (Winter 1977): 111–37. Suzanne Lacy argues that the urge to "fix" the question of whether gender is "essential" or "constructed" is a theoretical quarrel that ignores the ways in which artists occupy both positions on gender *strategically* in their work. Suzanne Lacy and Judith Baca, "Affinities: Thoughts on an Incomplete History," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 274.
[414] Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery," *Womanspace Journal* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1973): 11–14.
[415] Quoted in Phelan, "Survey," 23. For a recent look back at racism in the second wave feminist art world, see Indira Bailey, "The (In)Visibility of Four Black Women Artists: Establishing a Support Network, Defining Obstacles, and Locating Self Through Art," *Visual Culture & Gender* 12 (2017): 48–57. For a wider picture of racism within American feminism see, to cite but a few examples, bell hooks, "Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability," in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London; Winchester, Mass.: Pluto Press, 1990), 119–58; Hazel V. Carby, "White Woman Listen!: Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *The*

would organize the landmark 1980 show "Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States," presented at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York City, which sought to challenge the erasure of women of colour from feminist art movements.[416]

Among other works, this exhibition saw the debut of Howardena Pindell's performance video *Free, White and 21* (1980). Shot on colour U-matic tape in Pindell's loft apartment, this piece functions as antiracist testimony, and as killjoy satire of the white women's movement. Pindell recounts for the camera, in a conversational address, moments of racism and sexism from her life. Her mother, being the darkest of ten children, was once mistaken for dirty by a white babysitter and scrubbed with lye, leaving scars on her body. As a child, Pindell herself once infuriated a white kindergarten teacher by raising her arm to go to the bathroom (the teacher: "I can't stand these people!"); the teacher punished Pindell by tying her down to a cot. While relating this story for the camera, Pindell calmly wraps her head in white gauze, until her face is completely hidden, at which point this story ends and she goes silent. Between Pindell's recollections are scenes of Pindell – in sunglasses, white makeup, and a blonde wig – performing a white feminist, who reacts with skepticism and growing resentment to each of Pindell's accounts of racism. "You know you really must be paranoid. Those things never happen to me, I don't know anyone who's had those things happen to them. But then, of course, they're free, white and twenty-one, so they wouldn't have had that kind of experience." As Pindell tells of being barred from consideration for student office; of being denied the chance to apply for secretarial positions; of being openly disdained at a wedding party, the free, white feminist

Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain, ed. University of Birmingham, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 212–35; and the texts gathered under the section "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You: Racism in the Women's Movement" in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *The Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 60–101.

[416] See Mendieta's catalogue essay for this exhibition: Kazuko, Ana Mendieta, and Zarina, *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States ... September 2 through September 20, 1980.* (New York: A.I.R. Gallery, 1980).

cautions against ingratitude and threatens to "find other tokens," artists whose work is "political"

in the accepted ways. The tape concludes with an image of Pindell removing the gauze from her

face; then, of the white feminist pulling a nylon stocking over her head – Pindell later suggested

this was a "women's auxiliary of the KKK . . . a 'polite' white stocking" – and summarizing her

retorts against Pindell, the sheer stocking doing little to mask her voice.[417]

Pindell's video, with its antiracist satire performed under masquerade, links us to another

genealogy of feminist art activity. By the end of the 1980s, attention to what legal scholar

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw calls "intersectionality" is partly responsible for shifting third

wave feminism away from the urge to fix categories, and towards a recognition of the

processual, multifaceted modes of identity, experience, and struggle which can be collected and

enacted under the sign of feminism.[418] Phelan argues that intersectionality, among such other

influences as Judith Butler's theory of gender performatives, produces by the 1990s further

destabilizations in feminist art and scholarship, leading to a large body of feminist work

concerned with a critique of representation through "masquerade, parody, repetition, and

mimicry."[419] In his analysis of Pindell's *Free, White and 21*, Uri McMillan situates the role-

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[417] Howardena Pindell, "On Making a Video: *Free, White and 21*," in *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997), 65. In this same essay, Pindell notes some of the racist and dismissive reactions her video engendered; one can imagine a revision of the tape in which Pindell plays this third party of racist spectators.

[418] See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. (New York: New Press, 1995), 357–83. Crenshaw intends intersectionality as a "provisional concept," which points to the inadequacy of reigning concepts of race and gender (and by expansion, other essentialized categories) "by tracing the categories to their intersections." Hence, as Anna Carastathis and others have argued, intersectionality is rather misappropriated when it is taken to be a "solution" to conceiving of difference within feminist theory, rather than as a point of departure towards a horizon where the fused (not simply discrete-but-intersecting) experiences of marginalized subjects might be adequately conceptualized. See Anna Carastathis, "Intersectionality as a Provisional Concept," in *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 103–24.

[419] Phelan, "Survey," 24. A host of articles have explored shifts in feminist performance after the second wave. Laura Kipnis writes of the significance of the "grotesque" in 80s and 90s feminist video as move against a perceived "radical unpleasure or moral instruction" in feminism. Laura Kipnis, "Female Transgression," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 345. Jessica Chalmers notes the turn towards "inauthenticity" and parody in her generation of post-

playing in the tape in a genealogy of what he terms "avatar production" in Black feminist

performance; further, McMillan connects Pindell's enactment of the "White Woman" to Cherise

Smith's notion of "radical mimicry" in feminist performance, where it is the "excess" between

performer and role, not their exactness, that plays the critical part.[420] Writing on 2000s feminist

performance art, Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore note a rise in "neo-burlesque," where

"performing oneself badly" becomes of key interest, for example, in the roleplaying dress of the

"failed feminine," which points to the possibility of reclaiming even the "bad feminist" as an

affirmative figure. The authors draw a link here to the "de-subjectivizing" project of "queer

futurity," particularly as theorized by José Esteban Muñoz.[421] This chapter has suggested some

others ways that "performing oneself badly," and the "failed feminine," have functioned

previously in humorous feminist practice.

 What is the importance of failure to the utopian conception of feminism? Jill Dolan

writes of "utopian performatives" in theatre – drawing many of her examples from feminist

performance – which "spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location,

which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as *never finished* gestures toward a

baby boomer artists, as reflected in the parodies of academic panels conducted by Chalmers' feminist "performance-and-reading group," the V-Girls (1986-96). Jessica Chalmers, "V-Notes on Parody," in *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2010), 199–223. Anna Watkins Fisher writes of the turn to ironic "adolescent drag" in a younger generation of performers as a means to negotiate the "mother-daughter" inheritance from second wave feminism. Anna Watkins Fisher, "Like a Girl's Name: The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 48–76.

[420] Uri McMillan, "Is This Performance About You? The Art, Activism, and Black Feminist Critique of Howardena Pindell," in *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 173–74; Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

[421] Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore, "'Performing Oneself Badly?' Neo-Burlesque and Contemporary Feminist Performance Art," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 15, no. 1 (2015): 20–36. See also José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

potentially better future."[422] These are moments of longing in the midst of performances,

experienced as communal bodily feeling. Peter Bürger cites the indispensibility of failure to the

"Utopian quality" of avant-garde projects, since it is through this failure that utopianism is kept

alive, imaginable, its repeated death announcing fulfillment of its project.[423] Likewise, sensitivity

to the shifting ground of feminist thought – to the very notion that feminism is always plural, an

interacting, sometimes expressly contradictory, body of feminisms, with different histories,

desires, struggles – commends failure as an apt mode of artistic address. It is such feminist

failure that we can define, following Sarah Jane Bailes, as "that predicament in which we are

moved to do and make, or break and then repair, as the possibility of remaining open to a

difference that, whilst present, is yet missing."[424] I have been connecting this "possibility of

remaining open to a difference" with a notion of humour-as-articulation, which is not to be

confused with a loosening of ties from all previous commitments, as in the "disarticulations" of

feminism Angela McRobbie has analyzed in so-called "postfeminist" movements.[425] Humour,

like its frequent fellow traveller failure, can be the fluid that channels one generation of feminist

activity to another.[426]

Perhaps here we find another way to site the importance of Mogul and Rosler's videos in

a feminist politics, aside from celebrating the critical import of their humour. In their essay

"Feminist Futures and the Possibilities of 'We'?," Elaine Aston and Gerry Harris write,

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[422] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Utopia in the Theater* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 8. Emphasis mine.

[423] Peter Bürger, *The Decline of Modernism*, trans. Nicholas Walker (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 153.

[424] Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 200.

[425] Angela McRobbie, "Feminism Undone? The Cultural Politics of Disarticulation," in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: SAGE, 2009), 24–53.

[426] For a look at how the "consciously un-slick aesthetics of the 70s" had a revived influence on feminist art in the 90s, see Laura Cottingham, "The Feminist Continuum," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 284.

Feminism has always operated self-reflexively: as an evolving 'body' of political ideas and impulses. Feminism is not, therefore, something we propose as us needing to 'get back to': it is not our nostalgic longing for a feminism we knew, experienced and lived before. Essential to any sort of feminist politics has always been the idea that the 'future' is a question, is *in* question: is not necessarily determined by the past or the present.[427]

To this can be added words by Sara Ahmed: "to stay open to feminism is both to critique the world, which we face in the present, and to encounter the objects of feminism anew, as that hope for the 'not yet', in the here and now."[428] If humour is something that thrives by the moment, an "instant capture" medium not unlike video, it also seems potentially to carry with it something of this "not yet." Perhaps feminist humour makes room for a future by providing occasions for laughter in the here and now.

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[427] Elaine Aston and Geraldine (Gerry) Harris, "Feminist Futures and the Possibilities of 'We'?," in *Feminist Futures?: Theatre, Performance, Theory*, ed. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.
[428] Quoted in Aston and Harris, 3.

CHAPTER 3

PAGAN POP-CULTS IN THE RENTED DESERT, OR

THE HUMOUR OF LOST CAUSES AND SPECIAL EFFECTS

> In a way, in some of these [biblical epics], no matter how horrible it sounds, I used to look forward to the crucifixion scene, as then the special effects people would get to work and turn on the wind machines, clouds would boil, Hollywood lightning would crackle and pagan temples would split open at the seams disgorging the sinners. I guess all these planetary and meteorological pyrotechnics meant God to me and I welcomed their climactic arrival when the bearded actors made their temporary exits.
> – George Kuchar[429]

It may interest the reader to know that, several years ago, I tried my hand at experimental filmmaking. In 2013, I made a found footage video called *Separate Vacations*, which played a few festival sidebars.[430] On some of these occasions I was paid a small screening fee, so you might say I enjoyed a brief "career" in the avant-garde. It wasn't long before my career hit a snag, however, around the time a notable alt film critic lumped my video, anonymously, with a great many experimental works that year "destined for eternal, well-deserved obscurity." I couldn't help but agree: *Separate Vacations* was not a standout masterpiece. And so, facing a future as an avant-garde also-ran (curious thing), I promptly quit filmmaking and returned to the well-deserved obscurity of life as a PhD student.

I bring this up because *Separate Vacations* was my attempt to make a humorous appropriation video, and I believe the experience was instructive for me of how tricky it is to do that and still come around to making a piece of remarkable art, which is what I'd hope any avant-garde film to be, on top of everything else. In William Verrone's estimation, "avant-garde appropriations . . . showcase 'genius' and 'personal authenticity' as much as an original

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[429] George Kuchar, *The George Kuchar Reader*, ed. Andrew Lampert (New York: Primary Information, 2014), 87.
[430] The curious reader can view *Separate Vacations* here: https://vimeo.com/62506458

work."[431] This is what I was after: to appropriate, amusingly, but also to be a genius at it. (Never mind that it was my first try.)

To fill in some backstory, *Separate Vacations* was initially made as a final assignment for a graduate course in "recombinant media." Under the influence of Guy Debord's Situationists and Craig Baldwin's concept of "media jujitsu,"[432] I set out to *détourn* a box of videotapes I found left for trash at the end of my street. Some of these tapes contained recordings of news coverage of Pope John Paul II's historic trip to Fidel Castro's Cuba, circa 1998. I decided to construct a Baldwin-esque fantasy "re-narrative"[433] of this meeting of two holy dignitaries, compiled from CNN broadcasts and filled out with ironic borrowings from mainstream movies and TV commercials.

Leading up to *Separate Vacations*' festival premiere, I obsessively re-edited my montage in the fear that I hadn't provided enough aesthetic strangeness to satisfy the tastes of an avant-garde viewership. I added more footage, from a plethora of sources,[434] applied more and chintzier Final Cut Pro video f/x, and inserted an in-joke parody of a certain experimental film I had seen at the previous year's Toronto International Film Festival. In short, I grasped desperately for any sort of aesthetic markers that might secure an "avant-garde effect" for my video. What had to happen to this pilfered footage so that it "belonged" to the avant-garde, and

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[431] William Verrone, *Adaptation and the Avant-Garde: Alternative Perspectives on Adaptation Theory and Practice* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 35.

[432] "Media jujitsu" is the process by which you use your opponent's (in this case mass media's) weight against them – for example, you mock-effect the language of a dominant discourse to then turn around and hoist that discourse by its own petard. See Baldwin's remarks in Ed Halter, "Science in Action: Q and A with Craig Baldwin," *New York Press*, September 27, 1999. A similar definition of "artistic jujitsu" can be found in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 328.

[433] For more on Baldwin's re-narrativizing impulse, see Michael Zryd, "Found Footage Film as Discursive Metahistory: Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99*," *The Moving Image* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 40–61.

[434] I appropriated the vast majority of my film clips from the oeuvre of Hollywood journeyman Michael Anderson (*Logan's Run* [1976]), for reasons I can't say I fully recall.

moreover, made an original contribution to it? Could a Final Cut video effect be an avant-garde effect?

That I insisted upon making something humorous of my montage only compounded the problem. An operative assumption for me going into the project was that mainstream culture and the avant-garde represented two incongruous spheres, and that occupancy in the latter sphere entitled me to a kind of absolute knowledge and sense of humour about the inanity of everything that passed for popular media. I proceeded to target sitting ducks of the mainstream: clips from cheesy movies with glaring ideology; CNN commercial breaks laden with American paranoia; an image of the Pope being assailed by a bird (the top laugh-getter with audiences). I selected these clips for maximum negative-satirical effect, little appreciating the fact that, in my film appropriations especially, what I was borrowing was often already half-kidding itself. The results of my collaging of risible pop objects did nothing if not confirm Barbara Kruger's observation about the humour of appropriation art: that it is liable, through its negativity, "to congratulate . . . viewers on their contemptuous acuity."[435] Was I not taking for granted that, wherever avant-gardists gather, some aggressive mockery of popular culture would be a surefire bonding exercise? If I really thought the mainstream was so conventional, what made my conventional thinking as a dabbler in the avant-garde cinema any better?

I am, of course, being rhetorically hard on myself. *Separate Vacations* began as a lark and only later mutated into a tortured struggle to learn where I stood in the grand scheme of boundary-pushing creative alternatives. Nevertheless, I wish to use my experience as an entry point into two problems implicated in the making of such a work of pop culture appropriation. The first is the notion of an avant-garde film "effect." In a casual sense, the term "effect" may be taken to mean any technique in the avant-gardist's repertoire, however innovative. But the term

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[435] Barbara Kruger, "'Taking' Pictures," *Screen* 23, no. 2 (July 1982): 90.

also has a more troubling application, related to my efforts to make myself "readable" as an

avant-garde practitioner. An effect in this sense is something couched in convention, designed to

flatter the "acuity" of a prospective audience. It seeks to communicate in a rationalized,

"surefire" way, and therefore to reduce the ambiguity and openness we may regard as integral to

the best of avant-garde films.

This brings me to my second problem, which is how the distance between popular culture

and the avant-garde is worked out in appropriation art, particularly where humour is concerned.

We may be accustomed to the idea that, for example, Hollywood and the avant-garde film

fundamentally differ not merely on scales of production, exhibition, and distribution, but also in

the relative freedoms they afford the viewer.[436] The Hollywood movie, so the wisdom goes,

predetermines how the viewer should think and feel through the inducement of prepackaged

"e/affects," while the avant-garde film delivers not effects but "causes," leaving the viewer

interpretive room to discover what the film means and how it will affect them. But when it

comes to appropriating from the mainstream, it may be in the best interests of the avant-garde to

announce its distance through calculated means, for instance, by satirizing the insidious

manipulations of its commercial counterpart. Certainly, this describes my approach with

Separate Vacations, and in this I was drawing from conventional wisdom around demystification

practices, works that "show the spell" and thereby "break the spell."

Without wishing to downplay the critical utility of a good demystificatory gesture, my

focus in this chapter is on examples of appropriation art that create humour not from distanced

exposure of convention, or dialectical dis-illusioning, but through a deep immersion in aspects of

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[436] In many avant-garde film histories, particularly early on, Hollywood is treated as the monolithic enemy of the free cinema, when it is not ignored altogether. For a critique of this position in avant-garde scholarship, with its refusal to contexualize the avant-garde in the culture at large, see Peter Lehman, "For Whom Does the Light Shine?," *Wide Angle* 7, no. 1 & 2 (1985): 68–73.

popular culture that, refracted in the artist's vision, reveal themselves to be less easily determinable than perhaps previously thought/intended. In other words, I am wondering about a form of appropriation humour in which we may find ourselves under another kind of spell, feeling ourselves amused but unable precisely to articulate the obscure object of this amusement. Is this humour that functions as a "cause" with an unknown effect – or perhaps vice versa? Further, what does this kind of humour tell us about the popular objects being appropriated, that is, about the claims they have on our consciousness in the first place?

Before addressing these questions directly, I will make a number of stops along the way. First, I will revisit aspects of the historical discourse around the separation of genuine or avant-garde art (note: some critics would not agree on their equivalence) and popular culture (understood here to mean mass, commercial culture). It will be shown that these discourses have much to do with notions of "cause" and "effect," relative to a work's autonomy, as cited above. From here I will move to a short analysis of the Pop art movement, examining how humour emerges from the collapse of distinctions between the "effects" of pop culture and modern art, or from the willful surrender of "cause" as the modern artist's seal of genius and authenticity. Parallel to the rise of Pop art in the 1960s is the official formation of the "underground cinema," at this time inaugurating its own debates around the separation of art and mass culture. Under the auspices of figurehead Jonas Mekas, the underground or "New American" cinema positions itself as a force of opposition to Hollywood, and is met with critical opposition in turn. Though the underground cinema may have good reasons to be wary of Hollywood's cultural imperialism (the way it co-opts alternatives as just so many "effects" assigned their rational place in the mainstream), practitioners of the underground show themselves remarkably capable of appropriating from Hollywood with ambivalence, and even admiration. This will bring me to my

final section on more recent works of pop culture appropriation by a contemporary avant-garde

cinema, where I will analyze new forms of humour that have added to this tradition of

ambivalence about the mainstream, while at the same time grappling with a tradition of

conventions or "effects" in the repertoire of the avant-garde.

THE KITSCH / CULTURE INDUSTRY

> When painter X or playwright Y begins to turn out X's and Y's for his readied
> audience—kitsch.
>   – Harold Rosenberg[437]

The argument for the separation of high art and popular culture involves a discursive

history too long and complex to examine here. A few examples will have to stand for a larger

pattern of intellectual maneuvering in the twentieth century to guard the "autonomous" sphere of

art from the "cretinizing"[438] effects of the marketplace. Leo Lowenthal offers a tidy summary of

the position: "A product of popular culture has none of the features of genuine art, but in all its

media popular culture proves to have its own genuine characteristics: standardization, stereotypy,

conservatism, mendacity, manipulated consumer goods."[439] The abrupt cancellation of any

possibility for "genuine" art occurring in the popular stream, premised on a total identification of

mass culture products with the inherent logics of the technological and economic apparatuses

that engender them, is the familiar move made by high art's most notorious gatekeepers, Clement

Greenberg and Theodor W. Adorno.

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[437] Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 268.
[438] I borrow this unfortunate phrase from Bernard Rosenberg: "At its worst, mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism. And the interlocking media all conspire to that end." Bernard Rosenberg, "Mass Culture in America," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957), 9. Andrew Ross covers a range of issues in the pop culture debate in *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
[439] Leo Lowenthal, "Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957), 55.

Greenberg's is the less strident of the anathemas pronounced on mass culture. The archetypal product of mass culture Greenberg classifies under the pejorative "kitsch," which is synonymous with "popular, commercial art and literature" and the "rear-guard" action to the "avant-garde" that had sprung up, amidst the cultural tumult of the age, as a defense mechanism for genuine art.[440] Kitsch springs from a "debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture" – supported by the capitalist environment – to pump out "formulas," "vicarious experience and faked sensations": "Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same."[441] The rise of mass kitsch can be attributed to the "universal literacy" and sudden leisure that has fallen to the "new urban masses"; with time on their hands, and having lost their folk cultures, these uncultivated masses create the demand for the "diversion" of culture that kitsch all too easily fills.[442] Kitsch does not require sensitivity to aesthetic values nor to art history, only an appreciation for the predigested, systematized "effects" that kitsch serves up in its marketable reduction of art to that which is most representationally familiar. As Greenberg observes (it is not his preference for art, per se), avant-garde artists preserve their autonomy in the midst of this cultural crisis by withdrawing into an ever-narrower "absolute," one that gains "aesthetic validity" from "some worthy constraint" in a given medium.[443] The "abstract" is, at the time of Greenberg's writing at least, genuine art's necessary step to distance itself from a society that would eagerly accommodate kitsch and thus obstruct the progress of genuine culture.

Greenberg holds out a shred of hope that the masses might one day enjoy the freedom to elevate their cultural understanding, that is, once "the problems of production have . . . been

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[440] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 9.

[441] Greenberg, 10.

[442] Greenberg, 10. Matei Călinescu corrects the "fallacy," committed by Greenberg but especially Adorno, that kitsch was invented by the upper class to "divert" workers from revolutionary thinking; kitsch is, rather, a product of middle-class taste and leisure. See Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), 247–48.

[443] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 6.

solved in a socialist sense."[444] Despite his unrelieved negativity, Theodor Adorno would

basically agree that the masses are not primarily at fault for the culture they are handed, and that

their emancipation as individuals, though currently withheld by the interests of capital, lies as a

dormant possibility, "as ripe as the productive forces of the epoch permit."[445] Still, there is little

hope of this emancipation happening. For what Adorno, with Max Horkheimer, calls the "culture

industry" is a projection of the will of "executive authorities" onto all cultural consumables,

molding in its ideological image a mass of consumers whose type is "unfailingly reproduced in

every product."[446] It is futile to distinguish among the vast array of products in the culture

industry, because what we may perceive as differences in subject matter amount to the

"classifying, organizing, and labeling [of] consumers. Something is provided for all so that none

may escape."[447] All products are thus, logically, exactly the same and serve the executives'

vested interests. The culture industry leaves no room for the free exercise of imagination; the

effects of Hollywood movies, for instance, are meant to be swallowed without thought and to

confirm an organic unity between the world of the film and life outside the theatre, since both are

to be identically standardized to the measure of capital.

This gives us some clue as to where genuine, autonomous art stands in relation to such

conditions. Authentic art, for Adorno, knows the intolerability of life, and takes on forms

"harden[ed] against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth."[448] Negativity is

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[444] Greenberg, 18. Greenberg further reflects on how socialism might impact the arts in "The Plight of Culture," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 22–33.
[445] Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 2001), 106. Despite the cited passages, neither Adorno nor Greenberg shows much commitment to the agency of the mass-consumer public. The implicit notion at work here – of the public as "cultural dopes," or "purely *passive*" – has been criticized by Stuart Hall as "a deeply unsocialist perspective." Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 446.
[446] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 127.
[447] Adorno and Horkheimer, 123.
[448] Adorno and Horkheimer, 130.

essential to aesthetic expression: an artwork is "a thing that negates the world of things,"[449] and the authentic artist is always in struggle against innocuous reproduction of reality, driven by modern times to "mimesis of the hard and alienated."[450] As Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, "What is essential to art is that which is not the case, that which is incommensurable with the empirical measure of all things. The compulsion to aesthetics is the need to think this empirical incommensurability."[451] Conversely, the culture industry has as its goal an all-pervasive, unquestioning realism; even when its products are aesthetically fantastical, they are not contradictory to the social standard. Any glimmer of negation in mass products – say, as found in the sheer absurdity of "some revue films, and especially in the grotesque and the funnies" – is swiftly quashed by the "surrogate overall meaning which the culture industry insists on giving its products."[452] What's worse, serious art becomes degraded by contact with the culture industry, fetishized as a commodity whose value now lies in exchange – "the work's social rating" – over and above the work's use value, that is, its inherent value as art.[453]

We might wonder, along with such critics as Andrew Britton, how it is that Adorno escapes the stupefying effects of the culture industry, but members of the masses should not be allowed this possibility of exit.[454] Granting Adorno the dispensation of his superior intellect, we might further question his thesis that the culture industry reduces each of its parts to a totalizing sameness, such that it makes little sense to differentiate among products. Needless to say, Adorno could not hold himself to such a strict standard of interpretation; for example, he wrote

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[449] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, and Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum, 1997), 119.
[450] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, and Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum, 1997), 21.
[451] Adorno, 335.
[452] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 142.
[453] Adorno and Horkheimer, 158.
[454] Andrew Britton, "Consuming Culture: The Development of a Theoretical Orthodoxy (1990)," in *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 492.

short encomia to the comic art of Charlie Chaplin, who was surely no stranger to the market.[455]

Are there not contradictions in the culture industry, which leave space for imaginative engagement? Which afford points of exchange between art and popular culture? Indeed, Chaplin is an instance of a (complex) culture industry figure beloved equally by the masses, by intellectuals, and by artists. Such volumes as William Solomon's *Slapstick Modernism* elaborate the fascination Chaplin has held for the artistic avant-gardes.[456] Chaplin's case is just one of many giving evidence for what Scott MacKenzie calls "the dialogical relationship between the *avant-garde* and popular culture [which] offers the opportunity for both forms to critically engage with contemporary life and the public sphere, allowing for a radical re-imagination of the roles of both art and entertainment."[457] It might be argued that, pace Adorno and Greenberg, modern art struggles for autonomy – its antithetical relation to society – not just against mass culture but also occasionally in sympathy with its products. This is true even in the case of kitsch (which I do not assume to be the underlying condition of popular culture, tout court), for avant-gardists like Duchamp appropriated kitsch "for aesthetically subversive and ironical purposes."[458]

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[455] See Theodor W. Adorno, "Chaplin Times Two," trans. John MacKay, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 1 (1996): 57–61. For more on Adorno's writings on slapstick comedy, see Steven Jacobs and Hilde D'Haeyere, "Frankfurter Slapstick: Benjamin, Kracauer, and Adorno on American Screen Comedy," *October* 160 (Spring 2017): 30–50.

[456] William Solomon, *Slapstick Modernism: Chaplin to Kerouac to Iggy Pop* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

[457] Scott Mackenzie, "De Do Do Do, De Da Da Dadaism: Popular Culture and the Avant-Garde," in *The Routledge Companion to Global Popular Culture*, ed. Toby Miller, Routledge Companions (New York: Routledge, 2015), 185. Herbert Gans' well-known study concurs on MacKenzie's point, showing that the historical *ressentiment* of intellectuals and artists towards mass culture is matched by an alternate history of productive, mutual borrowings between the two spheres. See Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture & High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, Revised Edition (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), 39. For an appeal to rethink the avant-garde/pop culture opposition see Peter Wollen, "Popular Culture and Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 7, no. 1 & 2 (1985): 102–4.

[458] Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, 254. It should be noted, following Peter Bürger, that Adorno's conception of the avant-garde as the authentic expression of alienation from life-under-capitalism leaves out the attack on *art as an institution* characteristic of Duchamp and others in the historical avant-gardes, whose appropriation of kitsch, carted in from capitalist life at its most vulgar, gains in meaning through this institutional focus. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 84–87.

WHAT CAUSES AN EFFECT?

This chapter concerns the dialogue between avant-garde film and popular culture at the level of appropriation, and is more interested in areas of productive closeness than critical distance between these two spheres. I am, however, aware of a danger in overstating the reciprocity between the avant-garde and popular culture. There is ample evidence to show that the avant-garde's appropriations from the mainstream, while perhaps in the main critical, do tend towards ambivalence and, at times, outright affirmation of pop cultural artifacts. As I mean to show with my film examples later in this chapter, what results from the avant-garde's appropriations are very often in-depth examinations and expanded understandings of certain aspects of pop culture, exceeding the dictates of the market. On the other hand, it could be argued that not nearly the same level of engagement has been demonstrated by popular culture towards the avant-garde.

To borrow a phrase from Thomas Crow, we find repeated instances of the avant-garde being used as a "kind of research and development arm of the culture industry."[459] In Hollywood film, the appropriation of avant-garde art is often on the order of exploitation, as an artist's work may be deracinated for use as a "special effect," or perhaps, depending on the amount of prestige attached to the artist in question, as a means to increase a film's "social rating." This is arguably the case even when the artist eagerly collaborates with Hollywood, as in Salvador Dalí's dream sequence designs for Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), where Surrealism is but a short, exotic interlude allotted its rational purpose – i.e., made logical as a dream sequence – within a classical-realist narrative. When the artist's name is not famous enough to publicize, their work

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[459] Thomas E. Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 35.

may be copied without credit, as in the case of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969), which built upon experimental animator John Whitney's "slit scan" innovation for its climactic stargate sequence. Staying with Kubrick, we might also cite the instance where the editing style of Canadian experimentalist Arthur Lipsett's *Very Nice, Very Nice* (1961) was mimicked in the trailer for *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), after nothing came of Kubrick's letter asking Lipsett to submit his own cut of the trailer.[460] This is not to make kitsch of Stanley Kubrick's artistic achievements (all artists copy to some degree), nor to argue for Lipsett's moral high ground over Kubrick, only to suggest that for commercial appropriators sympathetic to the avant-garde, good intentions do little to prevent an avant-gardist's work from being treated as a supplementary "effect," just one more trick to add to the commercial artist's arsenal. Here, it would do to keep in mind Adorno's argument that "Though concerned exclusively with effects, [the culture industry] crushes their insubordination and makes them subserve the formula, which replaces the work."[461] Indeed, it seems difficult to imagine a Hollywood film supporting a sustained involvement in an effect derived from the avant-garde (*2001*'s stargate sequence may be an exception that proves the rule), or for that matter failing to regulate such an effect by assigning it a generic function.

The point here (which I hope to problematize) is that commercialism dictates the use of effects with some assurance of effectiveness, because the significance of these effects has been pre-thought or rationalized for the viewer. Returning to Greenberg's essay, we are presented with the following contrast between an avant-garde artist and a purveyor of kitsch: "Where Picasso paints *cause*, Repin paints *effect*." Picasso's avant-gardism demands a reflective engagement from the viewer, such that the ultimate effects of Picasso's art – its "recognizable,"

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[460] The source of this bit of lore, which has been promoted on the National Film Board's website, is Lois Siegel, "A Clown Outside the Circus," *Cinema Canada* 134 (October 1986): 13. Siegel had the story recalled to her in interviews with filmmaker Martin Lavut and former colleagues of Lipsett's at the NFB. E-mail correspondence with the author, July 2018.
[461] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 126.

"miraculous," and "sympathetic" outcomes – are not predictable from its plastic qualities but must be hard-won through contemplation. Conversely, Repin the representationalist "predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art."[462] Kitsch is equivalent to academicism, for it relies upon the systematization of art traditions to reap guaranteed pleasure and profits. Compare this to Adorno's contention that, in the culture industry, "High art is deprived of its seriousness because its effect is programmed."[463] Writing in a decidedly different artistic climate than Greenberg and Adorno, avant-garde film scholar Gene Youngblood makes a similar point:

> Too often today we find that so-called artists working in the intermedia network are little more than adroit imitators, collectors of data and phenomena, which they glean from the noosphere and amalgamate into packages that are far from whole. They're clever and glib; they've made an art of selling themselves, but they know only effect, not cause; they are merchants of mannerisms.[464]

The shortcutting of creativity through effect-driven art betrays one's collusion with the market, or at least one's talent for kitsch. Art becomes about clever manipulation of effects, taking what once may have been undetermined cause and rendering it a cliché. This may describe an old process by which art becomes hackneyed, but the process is surely accelerated by industrial, commodified culture, in which everything new must be stamped as, reproducibly, the same.

POP GOES THE EASEL[465]

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[462] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 15.

[463] On the other hand, says Adorno, "low art is put in chains and deprived of the unruly resistance inherent in it when social control was not yet total." Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," 98–99.

[464] Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970), 57–58. See also Fred Camper's disparaging remarks on how certain quarters of post-underground avant-garde cinema perpetuate self- and audience-pleasing "effects." Fred Camper, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," *Millennium Film Journal* 16–18 (Fall /Winter 1987/1986): 119.

[465] I wish I were the first to stumble upon this bad pun, but alas it was already the title of a Ken Russell documentary on Pop art made in 1962, and then of an exhibition of Pop art at the Contemporary Arts Association in Houston, Texas, in April 1963.

Artists of the consumer age have felt compelled to respond to the conditions of commodity culture and, where they don't become hacks, many of them become humourists. In the 1960s, Pop artists were accused of being both. In this section, I will focus on the humour of American Pop art, suspending judgment over its aesthetic merits. As I argue below, much of the humour of Pop art consists in parody, premised on a voluntary submission to the idea that so-called advanced (not merely kitsch) art-making could be something steeped in reproducible "effects" and cliché. An alliance with the readily digestible effects of the mass culture environment is central to the parody of Pop art. It is therefore important to follow Linda Hutcheon in conceiving of parody as something that can be done in "complicity and accord (*para* as in 'beside')" with what it imitates, using its imitative form as a vehicle to target something else.[466] The target in Pop art quite often appears to be, not popular culture, but art itself.

Allan Kaprow shares an anecdote of introducing the Pop canvases of his friend Roy Lichtenstein to the influential gallery owner Leo Castelli. Kaprow ambushed Castelli by lining the Castelli Gallery hallway with Lichtenstein's paintings, so that when Castelli emerged from his office, with abstract painter Jack Tworkov in tow, he was forced to take in Lichenstein's Pop all at once. Kaprow describes the look on Castelli's face: "they stopped dead – I remember this – and Leo's eyes started going cross-eyed and his mouth did that kind of rubbery look that the cartoonists make when they want to show somebody who is discombobulated. He tried to smile. He couldn't. And right behind him Jack Tworkov, without guile or anything, started laughing very, very supportively."[467]

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[466] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 53.
[467] Quoted in Thomas Crow, *The Long March of Pop: Art, Music, and Design, 1930-1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 127.

From the beginning, then, the evident humour of Pop art offered itself to confused reactions. Critics did not agree on the nature and extent of this humour. In her early essay on Pop, Lucy Lippard trusts that Pop artists are more or less seriously re-framing problems in modern art (e.g., monumentality, post-painterliness, bold primary colour) by going out into the mass culture environment, and that any "satire" inferred from Pop art's address to its subject matter is likely to be unintentional or otherwise of marginal importance in the artwork.[468] Other critics were less easily convinced of Pop's sincerity. To Martha Rosler's query about whether the Pop artist embodies "the *speaker* or the *spoken* of these 'languages' of domination,"[469] we can pose Max Kozloff's sardonic reply: "the probability of discovering [Pop artists'] overall attitude to American experience is obstructed by their speaking farcically in tongues, as if, somehow, we were the witnesses of a demonic Pentecost of hipsters."[470] Each of these remarks can be placed in conversation with Jean Baudrillard's comments on the "unstable" question of Pop humour. Baudrillard wonders: Are we being invited to laugh at a Pop painting? If we do laugh, is our laughter directed at the subject matter painted or at the painting itself? Baudrillard decides our inclination to laugh at Pop does not mark a critical "distance" from mass culture, so much as it "recalls that transcendent critical value materialized today in a knowing wink. This false distance is everywhere, in spy films, with Godard, in modern advertising which continually uses it as a cultural allusion, etc. Ultimately, in this 'cool' smile, you can no longer distinguish between the smile of humor and that of commercial complicity"; it is, Baudrillard says at last, "the smile of *collusion*."[471]

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[468] Lucy R. Lippard, "New York Pop," in *Pop Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 86.

[469] Martha Rosler, "The Figure of the Artist, the Figure of the Woman," in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), 97.

[470] Max Kozloff, "Pop Culture, Metaphysical Disgust and the New Vulgarians," in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Anne Runyon Mahsun (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 21. Kozloff later revised his opinions of Pop art.

[471] Jean Baudrillard, "Pop: An Art of Consumption," ed. Paul Taylor (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 44.

It seems to me that Baudrillard is too insistent on regarding the humour of Pop art one way, through its ambiguous, flirtatious commentary on consumer culture. Rather, I would argue that what gave much Pop art the flavour of an obscene art-world joke was not merely its pressing of mass-culture images into high-culture gallery spaces (in any case, the early avant-gardes had already accomplished this), but the fact that Pop emerged as a tail-end retort to abstract expressionism.[472] In other words, Pop art put figuration firmly, loudly, back on the agenda in American painting, but did so in a way that seemed to mock the pretentions – the intense subjectivity (or non-objectivity), the spiritualism of forms, the rejection of nature – upon which abstract expressionism had built its mythos of artist as autonomous genius. To make matters worse and perhaps more personal, Pop art effected this mockery by letting in a flood of subject matter that all but deliberately violated the terms for art's survival set out by critic and ab-ex champion Greenberg, particularly in his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."[473] If the abstract expressionist's medium-specific inwardness could be figured as a defense against the cultural "cretinization" of consumer kitsch, and hence a necessary withdrawal from the world beyond the artist's (now resolutely urban) studio, Pop art crafted an outrageous practical joke from the artist's belated "return to nature."[474] Like feminist art – and perhaps like it in still more ways – Pop introduced the "everyday" as subject matter through which to destabilize art orthodoxies.

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[472] For one abstract expressionist's feelings about Pop, see William de Kooning reported assessment of Andy Warhol: "You're a killer of art, you're a killer of beauty, and you're even a killer of laughter! I can't bear your work!" Quoted in Kelly M. Cresap, *Pop Trickster Fool: Warhol Performs Naivete* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 43.

[473] Gallerist and Pop art dealer Castelli recalls the competition in the New York City art market: "There were two camps . . . mine and Greenberg's." Quoted in Thomas E. Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1996), 89–90.

[474] It should be stated that, by the time he was advocating for abstract expressionism, Greenberg had lost the political thrust of his earlier criticism; in other words, he did not make any particular claim for abstract expressionism as a culturally *necessary* movement. In any case, Greenberg was predictably dismissive of Pop art, calling it "minor," while paying it enough respect to historicize it as a third movement of "idea" painting – after the Symbolists and Nabis, and the Dadaists and Surrealists – which was consciously resistant to "pure painting." He also noted that Pop provided a welcome relief from "degenerated" (shall we say "kitsch"?) forms of late abstract expressionism, but all the same Pop's lack of "searching originality" was a grave threat to painting's continuity of great achievements.

Echoing statements made by many of his fellow American Pop artists, Robert Indiana

called for an art that was "straight-to-the-point, severely blunt, with as little 'artistic'

transformation and delectation as possible," art that satisfied the "eye-hungry" artist's need for

consumption immediately and impersonally – with a "pop" – in the manner of, say, a Coca-Cola.

This blunt style was a direct riposte to the "boredom" and "over-saturation" of abstract

expressionism, which had become bloated with the full range of "self-conscious" brush

techniques. The Pop artist's rebellious credo: "Impasto is visual indigeston."[475]

Of course, the matter-of-factness of Pop art was itself a "self-conscious" technique, one

that artists deployed to humorous effect. Pop art figuration in many cases could be seen to

function as a parody of abstraction, whereby the exalted uniqueness of the abstract artist's

gesture was relocated in more or less blunt representations of everyday mass culture artifacts.

Pop artists did not play innocent to the parodic aspect of their work, though they often denied

intending any derision or superiority by it. Claes Oldenburg, for example, confessed to parodying

Jean Arp in his vinyl sculpture *French Fries and Ketchup* (1963), but not in order to poke fun at

Arp per se. Instead, imitating Arp in a splat of vinyl ketchup was, for Oldenburg, a way of

"humbling" art (though not necessarily Arp) by testing its definition: "You reduce everything to

the same level and then see what you get."[476] (Splat.) Oldenburg understood this act of parody to

weaken distinctions between high and low forms, commercial and fine art, opening up a less

Clement Greenberg, "Pop Art," lecture transcribed with an introduction by James Meyer in *Artforum International* 43, no. 2 (October 2004): 51–52, 55.

[475] Quoted in Gene Swenson, "What Is Pop Art?," in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Anne Runyon Mahsun (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 122. Cf. Lawrence Alloway on the "polemical" character of British Pop art: "Pop art was pro-urban and accepted the media's roots in mass production, at a time when traditional esthetics in England was mostly pastoral or universalizing. Pop art, in its original form, was a polemic against elite views of art in which uniqueness is a metaphor of the aristocratic and contemplation the only proper response to art." Lawrence Alloway, *Topics in American Art since 1945* (New York: Norton, 1975), 119. For an examination of the "personal" side of American Pop, see Donna M De Salvo, "'Subject of the Artists': Towards a Painting Without Ideals," in *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles; New York: Museum of Contemporary Art; Rizzoli International Publications, 1992), 67–93.

[476] Quoted in Bruce Glaser, "Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Warhol: A Discussion," in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Anne Runyon Mahsun (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 149.

certain concept of art. Pop artists make "a deliberate attempt to explore this area, along with its comical overtones."[477]

Following Oldenburg's example, we could argue the consummate Pop art parody consists in the *figuration of abstraction*, exceeding the tentative objectivity of, say, de Kooning's *Woman* series (1950-53), to re-figure abstraction as "straight-to-the-point" representation, something like a literalization of the stereotypical spectator's aim to find "recognizable" subject matter hidden in abstract forms.[478] Roy Lichtenstein's *Brushstroke* paintings (1965-66) famously pushed this idea to an extreme, making of the abstract expressionist's loose, exploratory technique a hard-edged, graphic form – an illustration of an impulsive stroke or drip rather than the action itself. Lichtenstein saw the humour in this: "it's taking something that was originally supposed to mean immediacy and I'm tediously drawing something that looks like a brushstroke."[479] We could say that Lichtenstein takes the modernist logic of ab-ex painting's self-identity and hardens it into a cliché: painting-about-painting is reduced to its caricatured "essence," remaining instantly recognizable as itself yet drained of subjectivity. This de-personalizing effect is only reinforced by the fact that Lichtenstein got the solution to the problem of how to "paint painting," quite predictably, from a comic book.

By questioning the basis for the "genuine" or "unique" in art through parody, Pop art offered itself to postmodern conceptualizations. Was it any surprise that, by 1964, the "unique"

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[477] Quoted in Glaser, 147.

[478] This danger in non-objective painting – the spectator's desire to re-object the painting against the wishes of the artist – was not lost on the Pop artist James Rosenquist. As he stated: "I paint anonymous things in the hopes that their particular meanings will disappear . . . There is a freedom there. If it were abstract, people might make it into something. If you paint Franco-American spaghetti, they won't make a crucifixion out of it, and also who could be nostalgic about canned spaghetti?" Quoted in Mario Amaya, *Pop as Art: A Survey of the New Super Realism* (London: Studio Vista, 1965), 95. Rosenquist also later claimed, "I'm responsible for introducing imagery back into contemporary non-objective painting." Quoted in Alastair Sooke, *Pop Art: A Colourful History* (UK: Viking, 2015), 82.

[479] Quoted in John Jones, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Roy Lichtenstein, October 5, 1965, 11:00 AM," in *Roy Lichtenstein*, ed. Graham Bader, October Files 7 (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 21–22.

style of Pop itself came under teasing scrutiny, in Elaine Sturtevant's deadpan reproductions of

works by Lichtenstein, Warhol, and others? Richard Shiff has argued that, while modernist

abstraction worked "to fuse iconic appearance to indexical performance,"[480] the

"postmodernism" ushered in by artists like Sturtevant, Warhol, and Lichtenstein gave rise to "an

art that openly *represented* indexicality as an iconic sign. The painter's mark was revealed as a

sign as unstable as any other, subject to appropriation, imitation, and decontextualization."[481] On

these grounds, we can distinguish Lichtenstein's parodies from, for example, Picasso's versions

of famous paintings by Rembrandt and Manet. One would be hard-pressed to say in what way

Picasso parodies the style, or "hand," of Manet; it is clear, and amusing, enough that Picasso is

intent to perform his own original rendition of the iconic subject matter of *Le Déjeuner sur*

l'herbe (1863), and therefore to sustain the notion of individualism in the arts. When

Lichtenstein parodies Picasso in *Woman with Flowered Hat* (1963), not only do we recognize the

particular Picasso painting being imitated by Lichtenstein's eminently impersonal "hand," we

also recognize the originality of Picasso being parodied, made "hackneyed," to use a

Lichtenstein phrase.[482]

Lichtenstein recognized a correlation between his parodies and an historical process by

which art loses meaning:

[480] Richard Shiff, "Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism," in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, ed. Michael Auping (New York; Buffalo: Harry N. Abrams; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1987), 103.

[481] Shiff, 116; Paul Schimmel, "The Faked Gesture: Pop Art and the New York School," in *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles; New York: Museum of Contemporary Art; Rizzoli International Publications, 1992), 19–65.

[482] John Coplans, "Interview: Roy Lichtenstein (1970)," in *Roy Lichtenstein*, ed. Graham Bader, October Files 7 (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 33. At the risk of confusing matters, it should be noted that Clement Greenberg refers to the medium-specific interests of Picasso and other avant-gardists as the "imitation of imitating," which sounds very much like what Lichtenstein is up to. Qualifying this, we could say that Lichenstein imitates imitating after the model of kitsch, not the avant-garde. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 8.

> …I like the idea of a senseless Cubism. At first Cubism had significance. It was saying something about vision, about unity, especially the relationship of figure and ground. But following Cubism—particularly in '20s and '30s *art moderne*—the style lost the point of Cubism completely, especially in the decorative arts.[483]

One has to wonder why Lichtenstein would reproduce in his paintings what he seems to believe has happened to Cubism of its own accord: the removal of Cubism's "qualities" until it becomes rendered an empty cliché, a mere effect of a lost cause. It is not clear whether Lichtenstein thinks of this loss of sense, the process by which original gesture in art is brought to conclusion in "decorative" cliché, as a peculiarly twentieth-century phenomenon. However, his parodies of Picasso, and of Matisse and abstract expressionism, are assuredly inspired by the mass-production environment. They take their "look" from commercial art, and, by his admission, are meant to appear fake, sort of like "cheap reproduction[s]"[484] (what Greenberg would surely call the quintessence of "kitsch"). This leaves open the possibility that what Lichtenstein is parodying is not (or not merely) Picasso, but "senseless Cubism" – a parody of a travesty, or a parody done in the style of a travesty: postmodern mise en abyme. In any case, for Lichtenstein, parody is less a means to decry mass culture's effect on originality than it is a way, á la Oldenburg, to test the definition of art. Lichtenstein takes the massification of culture as a starting point for a new kind of painting, in which parody is a means not an end: "It's a case of building something that looks completely without thought, or senseless, and then of course trying to make it work. I mean, that's the hope."[485] Lichtenstein finally proves himself to be an "old-fashioned" painter (his word[486]) in his desire to make his art *work*, have pictorial integrity, despite its surface lack of originality – that is to say, despite its humour. For this reason, among others, it can be tricky to

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[483] Coplans, 33.
[484] Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "Roy Lichtenstein in Conversation on Matisse," in *Roy Lichtenstein*, ed. Graham Bader, October Files 7 (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 49–50.
[485] Lebensztejn, 53.
[486] Quoted in Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 109.

link Lichtenstein and American Pop with Duchamp and Dada, for whom it was, so it seems, not a concern to make aesthetically plausible – i.e., formally satisfying according to established principles – the borrowed objects of the kitsch environment.[487]

The place of mechanical reproduction in Pop art parody deserves further comment. Pop art appears to latch onto the idea that reproducibility has, for better or worse, conquered all walks of twentieth-century American culture, and has thus thrown the autonomy of art into crisis. Rather than vigorously affirming the soul of the artist against the encroachment of mass culture, in the style of the brawling abstract expressionists, Pop artists like Lichtenstein and Warhol opt for a "cool"[488] approach that is interested in what results when mass culture (with its attendant "standardization, stereotypy, conservatism . . .") is let into art's conception. Hence, the outcome of Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes*, which resemble, in the words of Arthur Danto, "mechanical representations of vital gestures." This is only a partial account of Lichtenstein's achievement, however; as Danto continues, the *Brushstrokes* are also "artistic representations of mechanical processes," for they contain Lichtenstein's signature hand-painted imitations of the Ben Day dots

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[487] For a critique of Pop's "Neo-Dada" character, see Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 203–14. Richter quotes Duchamp: "This Neo-Dada, which they call New Realism, Pop Art, Assemblage, etc., is an easy way out, and lives on what Dada did. When I discovered ready-mades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty" (207-8). In typically contradictory fashion, Duchamp elsewhere said, "I like the young Pop artists a lot. I like them because they got rid of some of the retinal idea . . . With them I find something really new, something different, while painter after painter, since the beginning of the century, has tended toward abstraction." Pierre Cabanne and Marcel Duchamp, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 93. Despite Duchamp's later comments, the record shows that in the infamous 1917 case of his urinal, *Fountain*, many immediately (in all likelihood ironically) came out in defense of the object's aesthetic properties, likening its shapeliness to everything from a sitting Buddha to a Cezanne nude; in fact, "among Duchamp's close friends in 1917 . . . aesthetic response was the rule, not the exception." William A. Camfield, "Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917," in *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, ed. Rudolf Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 79.

[488] Said Allan Kaprow in 1967, "The last half-dozen years has been a period of cool detachment, irony and what we may call the flip-hip." Quoted in Barbara Rose, ed., "The Sensibility of the Sixties," in *Readings in American Art: 1900-1975* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 187. On a related note, abstract painter Mark Rothko reputedly referred to Lichtenstein, Warhol, and co. by the derisive nickname "Popsicles." Alastair Sooke, *Pop Art: A Colourful History* (UK: Viking, 2015), 57.

developed for printing colour reproductions.[489] We can add to this Lichtenstein's comments that

the *Brushstrokes* are designed to look "tediously drawn" and "painstaking," the opposite effect of

the immediacy they depict. A similar case is found in Lichtenstein's *Cathedral* paintings (1969),

which imitate and reduce Monet originals through the "machine-like technique" of the Ben Day

dot, but which are nevertheless done by Lichtenstein (and his assistant's) hand and therefore

take, by the artist's estimation, "ten times as long . . . as it took Monet to do his."[490] Lawrence

Alloway has pointed to Pop art's display of "process abbreviation," by which he means both that

Pop art deliberately shortcuts the labour-intensive process of painting (for example, by using

found objects or by reproducing familiar objects in a matter-of-fact style), and that Pop art

sometimes merely wants to appear that it has taken shortcuts.[491] While it is critical to

Lichtenstein that his parodies *look* machined, as though economizing the artistic process, the flip

side of this parody, its more secret humour, is that Lichtenstein exaggerates process by himself

shouldering the responsibilities of mechanical reproduction, striving for what Michael Lobel has

called the "ultimate product" of Pop art: the "handmade readymade."[492]

Of course, the foregoing discussion calls to mind Andy Warhol's signature wish: "I want

to be a machine." The implications of this statement for Warhol's practice are theorized in

virtually every major source published on the artist. For our purposes, we can examine the role

mechanical processes play in Warhol's parodies. Ralph Rugoff argues that, in the early 60s, a

large number of products from the Warhol Factory take the form of art parody. As Rugoff sees it,

the underlying principle of the Warholian parody is the deadpan insistence that, for every

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[489] Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), 110.
[490] Coplans, "Interview: Roy Lichtenstein (1970)," 36.
[491] Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art* (New York: Collier Books, 1974), 16. Alloway's main reference point here is Lichtenstein, but a more extreme case of false "process abbreviation" would be the photorealistic paintings of Gerhard Richter, who is sometimes classified as a Pop artist.
[492] Michael Lobel, *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 116.

breakthrough gesture in the art world, there is a mass-market counterpart. Rugoff's examples:

Warhol's *Ten Lizzies* (1963) finds Franz Kline's "brooding and irregular masses" settled in the

jet black silkscreens of Elizabeth Taylor's hair[493]; *Dance Diagram* (1962) mocks the action

painter's heroic journey across his supine canvas[494]; the *Do It Yourself Paintings* (1962) send-up

the "participatory aesthetics" movement; the *Brillo Boxes* (1964) emulate minimalist seriality,

and so on. Warhol's "de-idealising" and "de-sublimating" wit permeates so much of his life and

practice, suggests Rugoff, that it becomes possible to read even Warhol's failed assassination in

1968 – "[s]andwiched between the murders of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy" – as

just "another Warholian parody of a fashion trend."[495]

Rugoff is surely taking liberties here, but his examples gain traction when tested against

Warhol's oft-expressed philosophy of equivalence, his monotone view that "everybody should

be a machine . . . everybody should like everybody," as though living with factory-line

uniformity. For Warhol, Pop art was not about making discriminations, but about "liking

things."[496] More enigmatically, Pop art involves "taking the outside and putting it on the inside,

or taking the inside and putting it on the outside."[497] Like Oldenburg, Warhol believed

distinctions in art should be flattened:

> Everybody is too good now, really. Like, how many actors are there? There are millions
> of actors. They're all pretty good. And how many painters are there? Millions of painters
> and all pretty good. How can you say one style is better than another? You ought to be

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[493] It is interesting to note that Kline, like Pop artists (notably Lichtenstein), utilized an opaque projector to achieve his trademark abstract paintings. Specifically, he projected small India ink drawings onto large canvases, and traced over them. See David Deitcher, "Unsentimental Education: The Professionalization of the American Artist," in *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles; New York: Museum of Contemporary Art; Rizzoli International Publications, 1992), 106–7.

[494] By coincidence, Warhol's *Diagram* arrives in the same year Clement Greenberg remarks, "The very flavor of the words, 'action painting,' had something racy and demotic about it—like the name of a new dance step." Clement Greenberg, "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," *Encounter* 19 (December 1962): 68.

[495] Ralph Rugoff, "Albino Humour," in *Who Is Andy Warhol?*, ed. Colin MacCabe, Mark Francis, and Peter Wollen (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 103.

[496] Quoted in Swenson, "What Is Pop Art?," 118.

[497] Quoted in Gretchen Berg, "Andy Warhol: My True Story," in *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews, 1962-1987* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2004), 90.

able to be an Abstract-Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling you've given up something. I think the artists who aren't very good should become like everybody else so that people would like things that aren't very good. It's already happening. All you have to do is read the magazines and the catalogues. It's this style or that style, this or that image of man—but that really doesn't make any difference. Some artists get left out that way, and why should they?[498]

While it is advisable to take any Warhol statement with a generous pinch of salt,[499] we can remark how neatly Warhol's proposals for art align with the features of popular culture, which Edward Lucie-Smith has defined as the joint product of "fashion, democracy, and the machine."[500] More than Lichtenstein, the Warholian parody renders disconcertingly arbitrary the difference between human and machine expression, personal and popular art. If both end up looking equally duplicable, and equally stylish, why tell them apart?

UNDERGROUND FILM

Though the rise of American Pop art coincides with the inauguration of the "underground" cinema (both headquartered in New York City), and though Andy Warhol represents an overlap between the practices, the underground was not expressly favourable to Pop art.[501] Underground filmmaker Ken Jacobs once bluntly remarked, "Pop Art was a thing we

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[498] Warhol quoted in Swenson, "What Is Pop Art?," 119.

[499] For an extensive analysis of Warhol's "naïve" persona, see Cresap, *Pop Trickster Fool*.

[500] Edward Lucie-Smith, "Pop Art," in *Concepts of Modern Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 232.

[501] Along with Warhol, Ed Halter names several American and international Pop artists who dabbled in experimental films (though, it bears noting, not all would have thought themselves contributors to "underground" cinema as I describe it here). Ed Halter, "Pop and Cinema: Three Tendencies," in *International Pop*, ed. M. Darsie Alexander and Ed Halter (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2015), 186–88. A case could also be made for Michael Snow as, in Lucy Lippard's words, a "tangential Pop artist" who contributed majorly to experimental cinema. See Dennis Reid, "Exploring Plane and Contour: The Drawing, Painting, Collage, Foldage, Photo-Work, Sculpture and Film of Michael Snow from 1951 to 1967," in *Visual Art, 1951-1993 [The Michael Snow Project]* (Toronto: A.A. Knopf Canada, 1994), 29–38.

Janet Staiger argues for connections between the projects of the underground and Pop art, specifically as they both use Hollywood to counteract modernist pretention – in the underground's case, this means undermining the hallowed status of foreign art cinema. Janet Staiger, "Finding Community in the Early 1960s: Underground Cinema and Sexual Politics," in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, ed. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 60.

hated."[502] Fellow filmmaker Ron Rice bitterly condemned Pop art painting (or "New Realism")

for its business-minded "extension of industry – the Product into the painting – then Gallery,"

nothing short of "a sinister, powermad conspiracy of mind control through ART, [which] will

close the last door of the individual."[503] Along with objecting to the market-friendliness of Pop,

these underground filmmakers presumably took exception to the "cool" detachment of some Pop

artists, who as far as possible occlude their personal feelings about the objects they reproduce. In

the words of critic Alexander Sesonske, the humour of Pop was a signal that it was

"predominantly a cerebral rather than a visceral art."[504] On the other hand, underground cinema,

at least in its early phases, was highly visceral, concerned with the often messy business of

exploring the artist-individual's innermost feelings and perceptions.[505]

It stands to reason, then, that the underground's approach to popular culture would differ

drastically from the Pop art style of detachment. To state the obvious, the underground's

approach to mass materials could not precisely follow that of Pop since the underground

recognized no pressing need to critique its own traditions or aesthetic dogmas through the blunt

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[502] In his complaint against Pop art, Jacobs does not cite the names of Warhol or Lichtenstein, but Allan Kaprow, whom Jacobs accuses of stealing his and Jack Smith's "Human Wreckage" aesthetic and turning it into the "decorative, meaningless, and cute" Happenings Kaprow became famous for. Above all, says Jacobs, Kaprow's version "lacked terror." Quoted in Carel Rowe, *The Baudelairean Cinema: A Trend within the American Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982), 39.

On the other hand, Jonas Mekas seems to allude to Pop in the course of praising the "new humor" in American art, in particular when he recommends the reader "Visit the Castelli or Green galleries for a period of time." Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, ed. Gregory R. Smulewicz-Zucker, Second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 65. See also Susan Sontag's somewhat unconvincing argument that Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* belongs to the "genre" of Pop art. Susan Sontag, "Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 229–30. Probably Sontag is picturing something like Claes Oldenburg's version of Pop, certainly not, for example, Lichtenstein's (a cake sculpture by Oldenburg appears in Smith's film *Normal Love* [1963-65], as does an in-drag Andy Warhol, for that matter).

[503] Ron Rice, "Diaries and Notebooks," *Film Culture* 39 (Winter 1965): 114.

[504] Alexander Sesonske, "Art and Idea," in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Anne Runyon Mahsun (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 184.

[505] Perhaps from a distance it was easier to see a connection between Pop art and underground cinema. Andreas Huyssen points out that, for the student movement in West Germany of the mid-1960s looking to the situation in America, the "notion of Pop" encompassed not only Pop art proper but "any manifestation of 'subculture' and 'underground'" which signified a new generation liberating itself from cultural norms. Andreas Huyssen, "The Cultural Politics of Pop," ed. Paul Taylor (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 45.

deployment of a rival, mass culture. Further, it was not in the character of the underground to remain aloof in regards to where it stood on the dividing line between art and commerce. Indeed, to go by the critical ink spilled in promotion of the underground cause, popular culture – or Hollywood – represented the enemy whose conventions and "look" must be raged against. Whether this staunch oppositionality is matched in the underground *films* that appropriate from Hollywood is, however, another matter. Below, I will argue that this oppositionality is rerouted in underground films that demonstrate oblique admiration and curiosity for popular cinema. It is not my intention to dwell on this point, but here I would suggest that underground filmmakers' uses of popular culture rely far less on pre-held assumptions about their materials than do Pop artists, though the latter pretend to utter detachment from what they appropriate. This is a way of saying that, while both practices find a creative starting place in the "effects" of popular materials, the underground banks far less on the "pop" in these materials – that is, their instant mass-audience gaudiness and ubiquity – to serve as self-evidence of their effects.[506]

Before undertaking analyses of films, I turn first to the critical discourse around the underground, which we can consider an alternate version of the argument for the popular culture/avant-garde divide. Mockery is a key tactic for critics on both sides of this divide, sometimes passionately so.

THE CLASH OF THE CRITICS

Stan Vanderbeek's 1961 essay "The Cinema Delimina" formally gives the American "underground" cinema its name and establishes the stakes of its activity.[507] Written in free verse

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[506] Whether this has something to do with differences between the mediums of painting and film per se is perhaps a question for a separate study.
[507] Vanderbeek, however, is not the first to refer to an American film "underground." Manny Farber's usage of the term corresponds to Hollywood genre movies made by "true masters of the male action film" – Raoul Walsh,

and accompanied by the personal testimonies of such pioneers of the new movement as Stan

Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Len Lye, and Robert Frank, Vanderbeek's essay paints the underground

artist as a modern hero sacrificing himself (sic) to the experiment of knowing what film art is or

could be. This pursuit places the artist's aesthetic and spiritual interests at odds with the factory

productions of commercial cinema:

> Film is an art in evolution. It is the dark glass for the physical
> and visual change in motion about us. How is it then
> that we are suffocated with the cardboard cut-out poetry
> of Hollywood?
> The mind, eye, and heart of the artist will find a way through the dilemma:
> the making of private art that can be made public, rather than
> the public art we know, which cannot be made private.[508]

Vanderbeek's characterization of Hollywood is essentially that of Dwight Macdonald when

speaking about "Mass Culture": it is something, per MacDonald, "imposed from above. It is

fabricated by technicians hired by business; its audiences are passive consumers, their

participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying."[509] Such conditions thrust the

underground artist into the role of revolutionary. So long as the "entertainment merchants, / stars,

manufacturers" own the machinery of large-scale production, film artists are forced

underground, using whatever means available to them to "conjure what they hope will be

explosives vivid enough / to rock the status quo."[510] As for the needs of the public, while

Vanderbeek assures the reader that the underground film speaks an "international language,"[511] it

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Howard Hawks, William Wellman, et al. – whose "unpretentious" work has fallen to neglect by the late 1950s. Manny Farber, "Underground Films," in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, Expanded ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 12–24. And, before Vanderbeek, Jonas Mekas writes in a 1960 *Film Culture* editorial, "To see what is really happening, one has to leave the official palaces of the commercial cinema and descend into another, younger level, into that young underground where the ideas and dreams germinate, where the new climate is being formed before it reaches the larger public and official recognition." Jonas Mekas, "Cinema of the New Generation," *Film Culture* 21 (Summer 1960): 8.

[508] Stan Vanderbeek, "The Cinema Delimina: Films from the Underground," *Film Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1961): 6.
[509] Dwight Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes* 1, no. 3 (June 1953): 2.
[510] Vanderbeek, "The Cinema Delimina," 10.
[511] Vanderbeek, 12.

is also by nature an art, and accordingly deserves its own "Gallery-Theaters for / the screening of films so that / collectors / might buy them as they buy / etchings: / a private attitude for the / viewer as for the film-maker."[512] In his artist statement included alongside Vanderbeek's essay, Robert Breer concurs that his "ideal public" is "the art-collector type who would own a print of [my] film and run it from time to time for the same kind of kicks he might get from painting."[513] Both Vanderbeek and Breer foresee the underground artist's place not with the general public but with the high art crowd, with its specialized modes of spectatorship as well as modes of commerce.

Despite these early wishes, the subsequent record shows that the underground film remained relatively obscure and never fully embraced in the art world as such, neither by its market nor its histories.[514] Nevertheless, in the days of the underground's inception it is precisely the "pretentious" and "self-publicizing" attempts of polemicists like Vanderbeek and Jonas Mekas to establish the underground as the authentic core of film art, one closer to modern poetry and painting than to the counterfeit art of commercial cinema, that earned the underground its share of suspicions, if not outright scorn, by mainstream film critics. Responding to "The

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[512] Vanderbeek, 14.

[513] Quoted in ibid., 11.

[514] Consider the remarks of a 1977 "Report on the Status of Independent Film in the United States": "It is interesting that the free economic system which makes avantgarde film possible (avantgarde filmmaking as it is known in the United States is almost totally unknown in socialist or communist economies) also makes it all but impossible for the avantgarde filmmaker to earn a living from his or her work, as a capitalist economy demands that art have a market value. Market value is customarily determined by the scarcity inherent in the production of nonreproduceable works of art by a single person. Film, on the other hand, is inherently reproduceable and, perhaps even more distressing, deteriorates with use." Peter Feinstein, ed., *The Independent Film Community: A Report on the Status of Independent Film in the United States* (New York: Committee on Film and Television Resources and Services, 1977), 16.

This is not to say experimental filmmakers were ignored by the museums. They were, however, often treated as second-class citizens. For an account of a 1969 letter drafted by experimental filmmakers protesting mistreatment by New York's Museum of Modern Art, see Eli Horwatt, "'Inventories of Limbo': Post-Minimal Aesthetics from the Readymade to Institutional Critique" (York University, 2015), 147–48. For analysis of the efforts experimental cinema took to build its own art institutions, see Kristen Alfaro, "Access and the Experimental Film: New Technologies and Anthology Film Archives' Institutionalization of the Avant-Garde," *Moving Image* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 44–64; Todd Bayma, "Art World Culture and Institutional Choices: The Case of Experimental Film," *The Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 79–95; and Jeffrey K. Ruoff, "Home Movies of the Avant-Garde: Jonas Mekas and the New York Art World," *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 6–28.

Cinema Delimina" in the follow-up issue of *Film Quarterly*, with a piece entitled "Spare a Thought for the Entertainers," critic Ian Cameron censures Vanderbeek for his arrogant dismissal of the artistic contributions of commercial cinema (though Vanderbeek does include a passage about D. W. Griffith's innovations in his own piece) and for Vanderbeek's inflated, self-martyring tone. What Vanderbeek fails to realize, according to Cameron, "is that pop-art and minority-art are not different in kind, but are ends of a continuum . . . Both ends are important to the cinema and each can or should contribute to the other."[515] Cameron is merely paying lip service to "minority-art" here, as his article repeatedly implies that Vanderbeek's vaunted underground is far outclassed by the technical achievements of its commercial superiors.

A decidedly more skeptical response to the new film art is found in Andrew Sarris' review of the 1976 "History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema" exhibition of films at the Museum of Modern Art. Sarris' essay, entitled "Avant-Garde Films Are More Boring Than Ever," pulls no punches in debunking the "self-proclaimed" art of the experimental cinema on the occasion of perhaps its greatest moment of triumph in the art world.[516] Hardly any avant-gardist, present or past (not even that hack Maya Deren), escapes Sarris' withering judgment, and his summary opinion is that "At best, the avant-garde cinema is an eccentric reaction to the narrative cinema. To argue that it is more is to ignore the evidence of the perennial walkouts."[517] Of course, Sarris is an unrepentant lover of narrative cinema, responsible for refurbishing the stateside reputations of Hollywood's unsung *auteurs*, and in his takedown of the avant-garde he

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[515] Ian Cameron, "Spare a Thought for the Entertainers," *Film Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1961): 63.

[516] For a much earlier example of Sarris' antipathy to avant-garde cinema, see his 1962 review of the Filmmakers' Festival held at the Charles Theatre in New York City: "The New American Cinema is nothing but an idle pastime for intellectual ragpickers. Its art is so marginal that any critical evaluation degenerates into trivialities. My! That was a good shot! Look at the camera moving without wobbling! The montage is beginning to get to me! Unfortunately, most of the tentative efforts at the Charles are less the first step than the last stop, and this is particularly true of the polished relics of the avant-garde." Andrew Sarris, "Movie Journal: Hello and Goodbye to the New American Cinema," *The Village Voice*, September 20, 1962.

[517] Andrew Sarris, "Avant-Garde Films Are More Boring Than Ever," in *Politics and Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 206.

encourages the reader to follow along through this critical lens. Throughout, Sarris leads with the populist view that art is not socially meaningful unless it "communicates" with audiences, which narrative cinema does preeminently and the vast majority of the experimental cinema does only cynically, if at all.[518] For this reason, even what we might term the reliable crowd-pleasers of the underground cinema (i.e., those films that make overtures to commercial forms) fall terribly flat for Sarris, as in the example of Bruce Conner's 1958 "comic classic," *A Movie*: "One dreads to think what the comic duds must be like. Conner's irony becomes almost indescribably laborious after only 12 minutes. It strikes me that it is very difficult to be funny when you are culturally conditioned to despise your audience and most of the history of your medium."[519] One can only guess where Sarris gets the idea *A Movie* is a "comic classic," but he seems to expect this to mean that Conner's primary goal is to amuse, and not, as the evidence of the film rather suggests, to advance on nuclear-age terror by hurtling the viewer through passages of dark, absurdist humour.[520] I do think, however, that it is worth considering Sarris' observations about the disconnect between the avant-garde and audiences on so appealing an issue as humour, and about how this disconnect might relate to the artist's rejection of parts of his medium's history (namely, Hollywood), and further, about how difficult it may be to make people laugh if your attitude is indeed to reject what communication in your medium commonly entails, an attitude

[518] Sarris later commented on his relationship with Jonas Mekas: "I'd say that the big cleavage between us is that Jonas puts a higher value on expression than on communication. I put a very high value on communication. I think you have to reach someone, there has to be an audience there." Tom Gunning, "'Loved Him, Hated It': An Interview with Andrew Sarris," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 71.

[519] Sarris, "Avant-Garde Films Are More Boring Than Ever," 204. Sarris does have nice things to say about Kenneth Anger: "Despite his deficiencies as a filmmaker, Anger displays an unusual amount of wit, humor, audacity, and redeeming vulgarity for an avant-garde filmmaker. Perhaps his back-door relationship with Hollywood saved him from the fashionable obscurantism of his colleagues" (201).

[520] For a reading of the tragicomic impulse in *A Movie*, see David Sterritt, "Wrenching Departures: Morality and Absurdity in Avant-Garde Film," in *The Last Laugh: Strange Humors of Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 93–108.

Sarris elsewhere defines as the avant-gardist's stance of "This is me, and if you don't understand me, something's wrong with you."[521] I will return to these points later.

Sarris' hostility to the avant-garde is finally nothing compared to the vituperation hurled back at commercial cinema by his erstwhile friend and colleague at *Film Culture* and the *Village Voice*, Jonas Mekas. To be fair, as de facto figurehead of the underground, Mekas did not always and everywhere position himself as the enemy of the commercial system. From his posts as a critic, Mekas was capable of sparing a kind word for commercial cinema,[522] and he would later observe, like Cameron, that the avant-garde and Hollywood were both "branches in the tree of cinema,"[523] and also that "Hollywood is a cow, the avant-garde is a sheep. There can be no competition between them."[524] Yet this does not give the full picture of Mekas' obstinate promotion of the underground cause in the 1960s, during which Mekas ramped up his polemics and week to week could be carried by the heat of the moment to envision American cinema, its production and its criticism, as nothing less than a battle for the future of the human soul.[525] His

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[521] Gunning, "'Loved Him, Hated It': An Interview with Andrew Sarris," 73.

[522] For example, Mekas writes about Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks, "In their films the consciously imposed form seems to give place to a spontaneous, even hazardous flow – a style full of bits of slightly indirect details that do not always progress the plot but add to it indirectly, as moods, atmospheres, observations. And it is particularly these asides, these between-the-action remarks, that helped these directors to develop their very distinct personal styles and to inject their films with a live, natural, and fluent quality . . . in these films, life seems to happen without much forcing – without any obvious premeditation." Mekas, "Cinema of the New Generation," 4. These are, of course, fairly conventional *auteurist* remarks in the Sarris mode, and do predate Mekas' more vehement claims on behalf of the underground. See also Mekas' appraisal of a John Ford retrospective, in Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, ed. Gregory R. Smulewicz-Zucker, Second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 96–97.
    For accounts of Mekas' changing critical temperament, see David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 102–4; and J. Hoberman, "The Forest and the Trees," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 105.

[523] Quoted in Gregory R. Smulewicz-Zucker, "Introduction to the Second Edition," in *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, Second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), ix–xxxv.

[524] Quoted in Paul Arthur, "Routines of Emancipation: Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 39.

[525] The idea of salvation through art is detectable in the first statement drafted by Mekas and his cohort at the New American Cinema Group: "As in the other arts in America today – painting, poetry, sculpture, theatre, where fresh winds have been blowing for the last few years – our rebellion is primarily an ethical one. We are concerned with

satirical "Six Notes on How to Improve Commercial Cinema" counts among its

recommendations the gathering of all mainstream film critics in one place for a surprise

massacre, and the staging of a $15-million production called *Destruction of Hollywood* that

would culminate in the detonation of a movie studio with all of Hollywood's film equipment

trapped inside (talk about "explosives vivid enough / to rock the status quo"!). His "Notes" also

instruct on one approach the underground might take towards appropriating Hollywood films,

namely, to hold a screening of *Gone with the Wind* with every second foot of film excised and

the entire print coated in black dye, accompanied by the *Brandenburg Concerto* of one's

choice.[526] It is possible to read this latter "Note" both as Mekas' sincere idea of what an

improved *Gone with the Wind* might look like, and as a parody of what opponents imagine the

tomfoolery of avant-garde filmmakers adds up to – that is, nothing more than a bitter travesty of

the technical sophistication of commercial cinema. Mekas plays up this angle in a mock

interview in the *Voice* in which he is asked to come clean and admit that the underground was

pulling a fast one all along:

> It was like this. We decided to work out, to concoct a few very "unusual," kooky ideas
> and gimmicks – like hand-held cameras, out-of-focus shots, shaky camera techniques,
> improvised acting, single frames, jumpy cutting – things like that. Knowing the
> Hollywood psychology, which we studied carefully, we knew that it was only a question
> of some insistence on our part and some "casual" publicity – and Hollywood would pick
> up our bait. You see, Hollywood wants to be "with the people," "give them what they
> want," "be up to date." . . . And I don't have to tell you this – it worked! Our scheme
> worked perfectly! Today, in Hollywood, they are running in the studios with hand-held
> cameras, they are shaking them, while dollies and tripods are getting rusty. Next week a
> truckload of tripods is arriving from Hollywood to New York to be distributed to the
> underground film-makers – Hollywood has no longer any use for them. We are finally

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Man. We are concerned with what is happening to Man. We are not an esthetic school that constricts the filmmaker
within a set of dead principles. We feel we cannot trust any classical principles either in art or life." New American
Cinema Group, "The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema
Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott Mackenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 59.
[526] Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 86–87.

free to take any piece of equipment we want, any studio we want, almost for nothing! Now we can really start making our movies, while Hollywood will go underground.[527]

Could it have been this same "truckload of tripods" that launched the structural film movement of the late 60s?

For all his sarcasm, Mekas is not joking when he points to the ways in which the oppositional force of the underground was reduced by critics like Cameron and Sarris to a quirky sideshow, remarkable only for its amateurish flouting of established norms.[528] As we briefly covered in the introductory chapter, Mekas would hear similar charges from fellow travellers in the critical community who were otherwise sympathetic to the cause of avant-garde cinema. Parker Tyler, in perhaps the first truly "critical" history of experimental film, attacks the "wish-fulfillment psychology masquerading as a system of aesthetic values"[529] that plagues the all-inclusive, Mekas-endorsed underground, "whose prevalent aim is to exist without being measured or weighed by anything but its own self-approval."[530] Tyler's refusal to endorse the underground in toto as a socially oppositional energy, artistic criteria be damned, leads him to advance a canon of "serious independent film," reflecting a history of avant-garde cinema with meaningful aesthetic and thematic continuities, pruned of various forms of "smug" anti-art posturing.[531] As Tyler's critique alludes to, part of Mekas' controversy as a figure at the height of his influence in the 60s was his refusal to exercise rigorous critical discernment over

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[527] Mekas, 308.

[528] For a summary of contemporary popular press reactions to the underground – not all of which are dismissive, but most of which highlight the sexual taboo-breaking of underground films – see James, *Allegories of Cinema*, footnote 7, 95-96.

[529] Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History*, 1st Da Capo Press ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 25.

[530] Tyler, 234.

[531] Tyler, 187–90. For Mekas' reply to Tyler's deprecations, see Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 369–71.

underground practices – in other words, to impose evaluative standards, what Mekas (at least initially) derided as the "Big Art game."[532]

It was Mekas' humanist, not to say Christian, concept of art practice that led him to embrace the full range of "impoverished" techniques in the underground, their "repudiation of 'professionalism' and economic control" (characteristic to both Hollywood and industrial art cinema), as not only a badge of honour but as the last confirmation that the artist-individual was spiritually free.[533] Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker has commented on how close this brings Mekas to art critic Clement Greenberg, in the respect that both view the avant-garde as a bulwark against "cultural parochialism."[534] A more accurate comparison for Mekas might be to Dostoyevsky – the first to compose his "Notes from Underground" – whose protagonists are compelled to "err" in order to maintain their freedom.[535] We have seen this logic of authenticity, or autonomy, making its course through each chapter of this dissertation. We can now see how unconvincing this logic was for critics like Cameron and Sarris, who demanded real proof of the avant-garde's

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[532] Jonas Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, Praeger Film Books (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 88.
    Of course, Mekas hedged on his open-arms policy in 1970 by co-founding Anthology Film Archives, the first "museum" (or, as Jack Smith would have it, "mausoleum") dedicated to preserving the traditions of avant-garde cinema. Among Anthology's controversial first steps was a committee-approved canon of "Essential Cinema," which effectively enshrined only the cream of the underground crop, and exerted a direct influence over which films would be rented by universities and colleges. Not long after, Mekas addressed criticism of the Essential Cinema's exclusivity, vowing that the first selection committee would not have the last word, and that the project aimed "to grope towards the direction of a possibility of an anthology of cinema not as a dead body of closed works but as an art of cinema in process." Jonas Mekas, Peter Gidal, and Annette Michelson, "Foreword in Three Letters," *Artforum*, September 1971, 10. As Mekas would later explain, the 1973 death of committee member and chief benefactor of Anthology, Jerome Hill, effectively halted the development of the Essential Cinema Collection. See Tessa Hughes-Freeland, "An Interview with Jonas Mekas," in *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema*, ed. Jack Sargeant (London: Creation Books, 1997), 119.
[533] Paul Arthur writes, "As early as 1960 [Mekas] began to connect the excitement of new cinematic forms with a repudiation of 'professionalism' and economic control. The 'impoverishment' of means and techniques was celebrated as a sign of a cinematic rebirth that augured a more sweeping revolt against convention." Arthur, "Routines of Emancipation," 39.
[534] Smulewicz-Zucker, "Introduction to the Second Edition," xxxv.
[535] I owe this concept of the Dostoyevskian hero to Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Notre Dame [Ind.]: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 96.

innovations in film form, as opposed to the "minor," "reactionary" deviations from accepted conventions they felt the complete avant-garde accomplishment amounted to.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

So much for the war of critics over the soul of film art. In the next section, I will examine some of the historical exchanges between avant-garde or underground filmmakers and commercial culture. First, I will recount a few of the notorious instances in which the mainstream has co-opted the avant-garde, adapting its aesthetic features while hollowing out its radical aspirations. This will carry into a short history of instances where post-underground avant-gardists hired out their labour to Hollywood; attention will be paid to the kinds of "special effects" the industry felt could be profitably extracted from experimental filmmakers, particularly on the west coast. The notion of the avant-garde as a "supplement" to Hollywood is both challenged and expanded in my final subsection, in which I examine instances where avant-gardists interface with Hollywood through their films. A range of appropriation practices in the avant-garde give evidence that, in the eyes of experimental filmmakers, 1) Hollywood is not without its values and potentials; 2) avant-garde practices provide an exemplary means to unlock these potentials, and to more or less directly perform a critique of the commercial apparatus that held these potentials captive. In many of my examples below, the presence of humour is not a sign of the avant-gardist's mocking distance from (or "cool" complicity with) mass culture, but rather something produced in the unexpectedly close commitment the avant-gardist shows to mass culture's deeper affective registers and fugitive, polyvalent meanings. To the "demystifying" tradition of avant-garde approaches to popular media, then, we must pose a parallel tradition where filmmakers "remystify" Hollywood and the mainstream by enlisting – and thus transforming – their predigested effects for the avant-garde cause.

HOLLYWOOD REMAKES THE AVANT-GARDE

The willful impoverishment of Mekas' underground did not make it immune from the clutches of the mainstream. The underground was perhaps doomed by its association with the counterculture, a "fad" in which the marketplace eventually saw profitable opportunities for diversion.[536] Underground techniques crashed the Hollywood scene with the success of *Easy Rider* (1969), which was produced independently and distributed to immense box office returns by Columbia Pictures. David E. James cites *Easy Rider* as a case study for the tensions produced when the social practices of mainstream narrative cinema and its "alternatives" are combined in a single, hierarchically ordered text. For James, the sundry visual motifs *Easy Rider* uses to encode its counterculturalism can be traced to underground precedents set by Bruce Baillie, Stan Brakhage, and Kenneth Anger.[537] We can add to this inventory the name Bruce Conner, who was friendly with *Easy Rider* director Dennis Hopper, and whose underground films provided the major inspiration for *Easy Rider*'s editing schemes, as Hopper later confessed.[538] Sympathetic though Hopper was to the artistic counterculture,[539] James contends that *Easy Rider*'s industrial, commodity-driven priorities ultimately render the film's underground citations fragmentary and

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[536] When I say "counterculture," I am following David E. James' definition of the term, which specifies a foundation in the quietism of the Beats, rather than in the various movements of political activism nascent in the 1960s. James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 93.

[537] James, 15–16.

[538] For Hopper's citation of Conner's influence, see Andrea K. Scott, "Bruce Conner, R.I.P.," *The New Yorker*, August 12, 2008, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/bruce-conner-r-i-p. No doubt owing to Hopper, and to other Hollywood friends like Dean Stockwell, Conner's influence was felt elsewhere in the late 60s. Actress Teri Garr, who appeared in the Monkees' vehicle *Head* (1968, written by Jack Nicholson), said of that film's psychedelia: "I think it was actually very derivative of this artist at the time who was making underground films, Bruce Conner. He would make these films with cartoons, atom bombs, and stuff that were really quite interesting and metaphorical, about orgasms and stuff. So [Nicholson and director Bob Rafelson] copied that. I wouldn't say 'copied.' That's a bad word. Plagiarized? No, that's a worse word." Quoted in Sean O'Neal, "Teri Garr," The A.V. Club, accessed November 19, 2017, https://film.avclub.com/teri-garr-1798214431.

[539] Hopper was cozy enough with the art world and underground scene to appear in Andy Warhol's film *Tarzan and Jane Regained… Sort of* (1964), when Warhol visited the west coast. For an account of the making of this film, see David E. James, "Amateurs in the Industry Town: Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol in Los Angeles," *Grey Room* 12 (Summer 2003): 80–93.

unresolved: "As interludes within a dominant and quite conventional mode of representation, [alternative filmic codes] may be appropriated to secure the film's gestures of dissent, but they must finally be marked as marginal and supplementary—as deviations."[540] *Easy Rider*'s apocalyptic ending – Peter Fonda's Captain America to Hopper's Billy the Kid: "We blew it," before they are both blown sky high – can then be read as an allegory for the film's explosive failure to reconcile normative, capitalist production concerns with the disparate, idealistic practices of the cinematic counterculture.[541]

If the aims and principles of the underground remained incommensurable with commercial cinema in the 1960s and 70s, it was not for lack of instances where underground filmmakers "surfaced" to the mainstream. Curtis Harrington, Brian De Palma, Robert Downey, Sr., Paul Bartel, and, of course, Andy Warhol (with Paul Morrissey) are arguably a few of the fixtures and fellow travellers of the underground to make films in industrial modes. Tellingly, in the cases of De Palma, Downey, Sr., and Paul Bartel, the filmmakers first gained notice for their underground (albeit largely narrative) comedies,[542] and it was on this reputation that they were granted opportunities in the commercial system, suggesting that the most exploitable of the underground's qualities was perceivably its off-beat, kinky sense of humour. For example, De Palma began his career on the underground circuit with the 1962 spoof *Woton's Wake* (which screened at Amos Vogel's Cinema 16), and finished out the decade with a pair of independent, feature-length comedies about young New York radicals (*Greetings* [1968] and *Hi, Mom!*

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[540] James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 16.
[541] James, 17.
[542] Downey, Sr.'s *Chafed Elbows* (1966) and Bartel's *The Secret Cinema* (1968) were well received by critics and audiences. Both films, however, were arguably bids for a commercial reception, thus throwing into question whether they can be properly considered "underground," a distinction that David E. James defines by "practice" as opposed to "manufacture." James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 120. Cf. Parker Tyler on *Chafed Elbows*: "I should say it is quite impossible that an Underground film which Bosley Crowther, Judith Crist, Archer Winsten, and *Cue* all saw fit to praise could rightly belong to the bona fide Underground. The film's effort at style is significant: it tries to out-kindergarten the kindergarten's view of the adult world." Tyler, *Underground Film*, 49.

[1970]), before being hired by Warner Bros. to direct *Get to Know Your Rabbit* (1972), a satire on the corporate world starring comedian-turned-spokesman-for-the-counterculture Tommy Smothers.

It is perhaps not right to lump Curtis Harrington in with the above names, as he had a career in experimental psychodramas behind him by the turn of the 60s, and had already moved to writing and directing independent horror and sci-fi features for American International Pictures (*Night Tide* [1961, made independently and distributed by AIP] and *Queen of Blood* [1966], both starring Dennis Hopper). From here, Harrington landed directorial assignments on genre shockers with Universal Pictures (*Games* [1967]) and United Artists (*What's the Matter with Helen?* [1971]), before settling into two decades directing network television. This is not the place for a proper analysis of Harrington's industry career, but I think his name is worth mentioning as an example of an experimental filmmaker whose transition to the mainstream was accomplished through horror and sci-fi – commercial genres that, like comedy, could arguably assimilate underground e/affects without thereby disrupting narrative or stylistic cohesion.[543]

THE AVANT-GARDE AS SPECIAL EFFECT

Keeping in mind this connection to genre cinema, a broader history can be written of the experimental filmmakers who have taken industry work in special effects departments. In a fascinating chapter of her book *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics*, Julie A. Turnock chronicles the exchanges between Hollywood

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[543] For a discussion of Harrington's transition from the avant-garde to commercial horror, see Stephen R. Bissette, "Curtis Harrington and the Underground Roots of the Modern Horror Film," in *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*, ed. Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 40–50. A good survey of the cross-sections of the avant-garde and the horror genre is Kier-La Janisse, "TRANSFORMING THE INVISIBLE GHOST," Spectacular Optical, accessed November 20, 2017, http://www.spectacularoptical.ca/2015/11/transforming-the-invisible-ghost/.

and west coast experimental animation from the 1950s through the 70s, particularly in the area of optical effects. Services were rendered in this capacity by such animators as John Whitney, Pat O'Neill, and Larry Cuba, the latter of whom gigged on *Star Wars* (1977) for one-time experimental student filmmaker George Lucas (who is on the record as being influenced by Arthur Lipsett). Bay Area visual music pioneer Jordan Belson flat out licensed his films *Allures* (1961) and *Samadhi* (1967) for use in the 1977 sci-fi horror movie *Demon Seed*, in which Belson's images are made to represent the consciousness of the evil supercomputer that molests Julie Christie. As Turnock is quick to note, the channel to the mainstream was far more open on the west coast than on the east coast of Mekas and company, owing to west coast experimentalists' proximity to Hollywood (along with the farm system of California film schools) and to their wizardry with animation stands and optical printers.[544] At least with the west coast filmmakers Turnock discusses, experimental techniques were not synonymous with an "impoverished" look, and surrounded by a big-budget production these techniques could even appear high-tech.[545]

Scott Bartlett is another west coast experimental filmmaker who plied his trade in Hollywood. A 1981 profile in *Film Comment* finds Bartlett fresh off "technical consultant" work on Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980), for which Bartlett designed optically printed hallucination sequences (e.g., the one that ends with William Hurt barfing up a lizard). In an interview with the magazine, Bartlett looks forward to his feature directorial debut on a sci-fi film called *Interface* for Paramount, a project that would never come to pass. Bartlett's comments are particularly interesting because they show an experimental filmmaker eager to get

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[544] Julie A. Turnock, *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 51.
[545] For more on the vanguard of experimental animation and its connections with Hollywood and corporate technology development, see Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*.

off the "dole" of arts funding and find another way to monetize his skills and aesthetics, namely, through genre movies. As Bartlett reveals, "it's through special effects that I've made my inroads [to Hollywood], though the term sticks in my craw."[546] Again we find the experimentalist's labour classified as something specialized that can be hired out to induce fantastic or outré effects in a predominantly conventional mode of production. Bartlett's interviewer Mitch Tuchman provides a fairly tidy summary of the relations between the underground and mainstream we have observed until now: "If there is any rule of thumb governing these relations, it might be: avant-gardists whose works is narrative move first to feature length and then to feature films; avant-gardists whose primary accomplishment is optical manipulation hire out as special effects operatives; structuralists remain aloof."[547] The last claim isn't entirely true, for we have it on anecdote that Paul Sharits once expressed a desire to break into horror filmmaking.[548]

In the same *Film Comment* interview, Bartlett recalls the underground film's brief vogue period in the late 1960s. "There was a flurry of interest with youth culture," Bartlett says. "During that time there were constant calls from Hollywood. I was so innocent then. I'd send storyboards and volunteer my services. Six months later I'd see my ideas on the screen though I had not done the work."[549] This is not an unusual story. Asked about the appropriation of experimental film aesthetics by MTV, Michael Snow remarked, "That was happening in New York in the sixties and seventies. Leslie Trumbull at the New York Film-Makers' Co-op told me there were a couple of advertising agencies that would rent ten or twenty films and use their ideas."[550] It would be impossible to track all of the instances where experimental cinema was

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[546] Mitch Tuchman, "Scott Bartlett in Hollywood," *Film Comment* 17, no. 3 (May-June 1981): 47.
[547] Tuchman, 46.
[548] See Paul Sharits, *"I Was a Flawed Modernist": Collected Writings of and Stories about Paul Sharits*, ed. Sarah Markgraf (New York: The New American Cinema Group; The Film-Makers' Co-op, 2017), 340.
[549] Tuchman, "Scott Bartlett in Hollywood," 47.
[550] Mike Hoolboom, "Michael Snow [Interview]," accessed October 20, 2017, http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=112.

conceivably plagiarized by advertisements, music videos, and Hollywood movies. We know that

Stan Brakhage himself shot a commercial for Downy fabric softener,[551] but can we know for

certain how many times Brakhage's signature aesthetic was co-opted to sell goods?[552] The most

infamous example is the title sequence for David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995), where unmistakably

Brakhagian flares, scratches, and stutters act like a "metaphor on vision" for the twisted mental

workings of a serial killer.[553] It bears repeating that experimental techniques have been

perpetually marked as "deviant" or otherwise "special" by the mainstream, treated as deracinated

stylistic effects that offer the viewer a novel, vicarious thrill without causing them to imagine

that these effects once held separate, even contradictory, meanings in their original contexts.[554]

MORGAN FISHER'S *STANDARD GAUGE*

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[551] It is tricky to track down hard confirmation about Brakhage's work with Downy, but it appears he mentioned it in lectures. See the notes taken by one of his students in Christopher Luna, ed., *The Flame Is Ours: The Letters of Stan Brakhage and Michael McClure 1961-1978* (Big Bridge, 2011), 282, http://www.bigbridge.org/BB15/2011_BB_15_FEATURES/Luna_McClure_Brakhage_Feature/THE_FLAME_IS_OURS.pdf. I also had the Downy story confirmed to me by Brakhage friend R. Bruce Elder. It seems Brakhage shot the now-iconic image of a fabric softener bottle falling in slow motion into a laundry hamper.

[552] For Brakhage's rather forgiving attitude towards co-optation of his work, and his qualified enthusiasm for industrial cinema, see Suranjan Ganguly, "Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview," in *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Wheeler W. Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 157–59. Brakhage was in fact an avid filmgoer who patronized a wide range of commerical offerings. In a June 2017 talk given in Toronto, Brakhage friend and fellow filmmaker Willie Varela related a story of going to see the teen comedy *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999) with Brakhage, at the latter's suggestion. A film's being commercial, for Brakhage, did not negate any possibility of it containing art. From the Ganguly interview: "As Man Ray once said to me on a bus ride in Brussels in 1958, 'I've never seen a movie that didn't have at least thirty seconds of real film in it and I've never seen one that had much more.' And that's true—there are always moments in films that are like whole visions in themselves" (158). The reader will note how closely these perceptions match those of the appropriation artists discussed later in this chapter. Cf. also Jonas Mekas' polemical remark that "in a Hollywood movie, all beauty or delicate insight is a matter of chance." Jonas Mekas, "Why Do People Like Morbid Movies?," *The New York Times*, August 3, 1969.

[553] As Kyle Cooper, the title designer on *Se7en*, explains, "David Fincher wanted to set up the film's relationship with evil in a very direct and uncomfortable way . . . I wanted to get across the idea of the killer, to make something that he would have made. That's how you want it to be. The form should be born out of the content." Quoted in Yael Braha and Bill Byrne, *Creative Motion Graphic Titling for Film, Video, and the Web* (Boston: Focal Press, 2011), 58.

[554] For a nuanced examination of how utopian experimental visions – particularly Jordan Belson and Scott Bartlett's – become "inverted" into the dystopian special effects of mainstream horror cinema, see Henning Engelke, "Posthumanistische Visionen in Horrorfilmen Der 1970er Jahre," *Kunsttexte.De* 3 (2016), https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/8141/engelke.pdf.

A final example of an avant-gardist at work in Hollywood will help us to frame the difference between the appropriation habits of the mainstream versus those of experimental filmmakers. Morgan Fisher is a Southern California-based experimental filmmaker who took jobs in the early 70s as an editor on commercial films, in the meantime making his own, mainly structural works, such as *Production Stills* (1970), *Picture and Sound Rushes* (1974), and *Cue Rolls* (1974). Fisher's films can be roughly linked by a preoccupation with (often humorously) "demystifying" the apparatus of film production. *Production Stills*, for example, presents a single static shot of a white wall upon which are affixed a series of Polaroids documenting the very film Fisher is in the midst of making, thus collapsing the usual distance between process and final product, as well as subtly mocking the industrial practice of production stills by lavishing equivalent attention on Fisher's rather modest exercise, which Fisher has chosen to shoot with an industry-grade camera setup on a soundstage. The "Industry" is indeed a constant reference point for Fisher, "in both a positive and a negative sense, something to recognize and at the same time to react to."[555] He explains further:

> *Production Stills* presents the allure of the Industry, while at the same time it takes an attitude toward the Industry by misappropriating its resources . . . the film's refusal to take advantage of the capabilities of the equipment is a way of criticizing the use that is customarily made of it, just as the film's refusal of production values and its visual poverty are ways of obliquely suggesting other kinds of poverty in products of the Industry.[556]

As a so-called "structural" filmmaker, Fisher is perhaps remarkable for training his investigations of the medium on industrial standards of representation (e.g., *Picture and Sound Rushes* deconstructs "double system" sound not commonly utilized by experimental

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[555] Quoted in Scott MacDonald, "Morgan Fisher [Interview]," in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 361.
[556] MacDonald, 364–65.

filmmakers). In fact, Fisher believes it is his persistent address of the Industry that kept his films from the full embrace of Mekas, P. Adams Sitney, and their "Essential Cinema" project.[557]

Standard Gauge (1984) is Fisher's largely autobiographical account of working as a commercial film editor. Fixing his 16mm camera on a light table, Fisher displays a series of short lengths of 35mm film he has rescued from editing rooms and laboratory scrap bins over his years toiling in the industry. Examples of what he has collected include a section of leader accidentally overprinted with subtitles from Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967), a trailer snippet for Vincente Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953), and, most amusingly, a precious few frames of a low-budget film entitled (at some point, anyway) *Messiah of Evil* (1973), on which Fisher served as assistant editor and, as we see in the frames, also had a role as a bit player. For each scrap of film Fisher displays, we are treated to Fisher's narration of the scrap's provenance, its intended function (including the function it holds for Fisher now that he possesses the scrap), and, in some cases, its prospective destiny. Thus, Fisher proposes to restore the context of the material he appropriates and offers to us in severed pieces, a procedure we might say is diametrically opposed to Hollywood's uprooting of the avant-garde. Fisher's firsthand lesson suggests that commercial film maintains its "standards" by burying its own production histories, by revealing shockingly little about the parts and labour that make movies possible. In this sense, *Standard Gauge* invites comparison with the historical-materialist films of Fisher's colleague Thom Andersen (thanked by Fisher in his end credits[558]), particularly with Andersen's monumental essay film *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), which appropriates clips from movies filmed in Los

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[557] See Enrico Camporesi and Rinaldo Censi, "Single-Takes and Great Complexities: A Conversation with Morgan Fisher," *Millennium Film Journal* 63 (Fall 2014): 87. Fisher details a history of exclusion from Sitney's critical project in his essay "Missing the Boat," in *Morgan Fisher: Writings*, ed. Sabine Folie and Susanne Titz (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012), 78–84. Sitney reckons with Fisher's work in P. Adams Sitney, "Medium Shots: The Films of Morgan Fisher," *Artforum International* 44, no. 5 (January 2006): 201–5.

[558] Fisher and Andersen collaborated on the 1975 documentary *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer*. For Fisher's account of their relationship and mutual influence on one another, see Camporesi and Censi, "Single-Takes and Great Complexities."

Angeles to reconstruct the manifold contours and narratives of the city concealed by Hollywood depictions.[559]

Among the most memorable segments in *Standard Gauge* has Fisher discoursing on "Shirley card" models, whose images are provided to motion picture lab technicians for colour balancing. Fisher begins with an image of a model he refers to as "China Girl," an unfortunate name but the one used by the labs, he explains. China Girl is a white model – all the models are white – outfitted in a Chinese cheongsam dress; her image will be used as an industry guide for "well-exposed skin tones." Continuing with other examples, Fisher informs us that the Shirley models, boxed in by reference colour charts, are typically spliced into the leader of picture negatives, thus becoming an auxiliary component of release prints. Fisher pauses to consider what we have learned: "This figure's sex, her being in the margin of the film, her serving to establish and maintain a standard of correct appearance: these are aspects of a single question that deserves thought." What this question might be is left for us to ponder, though Fisher has staged the intersections of the matter for us clearly enough. In parting, Fisher notes, "It is the people who work in labs, who dedicate their lives to rendering appearance perfect . . . who know these women best." But through Fisher's film we have also made acquaintance with these women, at least with their images and how they function, and so we find ourselves imbued with knowledge of an industrial film practice typically pushed to the side and tossed as scraps.[560] As

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[559] *Los Angeles Plays Itself* devotes a memorable section to the aforementioned Hollywood practice of labelling art "deviant." With ample film clips for illustration, Andersen recounts Hollywood's habit of using famous mid-century modern homes as the sinister headquarters of movie villains. The section is capped off with the image of Mel Gibson in a pickup truck gleefully demolishing John Lautner's Garcia House (here, a drug smuggler's lair) at the end of *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989).

[560] Another structural film to centrally include the Shirley card is Owen Land's *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (1966). Because the film is intentionally littered with dirt, scratches, sprocket holes, etc. (Land promoted it as "the dirtiest film ever made"), it renders the Shirley card amusingly functionless as a colour guide. A Shirley card model also pops up as a live character in Land's *New Improved Institutional Quality: In the Environment of Liquids and Nasals a Parasitic Vowel Sometimes Develops* (1976), an

we will see in the next section, it is the recovery of marginal, subdued, or untapped aspects of

commercial culture that best characterizes the avant-garde's assorted strategies of appropriation.

In this way, the avant-garde acts as a "supplement" to Hollywood on its own terms, terms which

are often personal, critical, and humorous, yet not, ipso facto, necessarily "distant" from

Hollywood modes and myths.

SINS OF THE MOVIEPOIDS

> [New American Cinema] has a way of holding faith with Hollywood for all its
> savageness, a manner of burning off the superficial tinsel to touch the incredible essence
> of that body of belief in order to press it forward, in order to carry in triumph on
> shoulder-height, in order to insist on its promise and perhaps foster its fulfillment. That
> the promise is the sham and its product sheer horror seems not to mitigate the naivete of
> the New American Cinema. It is, yes, "new," but it is still an "American" cinema.
>   – Ronald Tavel[561]

The first thing to note about the naïve underground cinema's appropriations of

Hollywood is that, in the filmmaker's address, one rarely finds the clear-cut animosity that

motivates the avant-garde critic's fiercest brickbats. These appropriation practices implicitly

contradict accusations by Gene Youngblood, among other critics, to the effect that

"[c]ommercial entertainment not only isn't creative, it actually destroys the audience's ability to

appreciate and participate in the creative process."[562] In my introductory chapter, I covered some

of the initial inspirations American avant-garde cinema took from the commercial film,

characteristically the work of the silent comedians. These inspirations were primarily worked out

on a performative level (for example, Sidney Peterson and his ilk mugging like vaudeville

clowns), or else were a matter of injecting the avant-garde with the peculiar formal energy of the

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example of Land's parodistic approach to the medium-reflexive obsessions of structural film. See also Genevieve
Yue, "The China Girl on the Margins of Film," *October* 153 (Summer 2015): 96–116.
[561] Ronald Tavel, "The Banana Diary ('Harlot')," *Film Culture* 40 (Spring 1966): 50.
[562] Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, 59.

largely admired popular object. Mutatis mutandis, we might say the same for the burlesques of Hollywood made by cutups of the New York underground like Jack Smith and twins George and Mike Kuchar – one important difference being that, in this case, failure becomes a formal strategy in asserting the artists' fringe affiliations.

Filtered through the exaggerated failure of taste that is the keynote of camp aesthetics, Smith and the Kuchars' (mock-tragi)comedies often scan as intentionally disastrous attempts to play the Hollywood game. They begin with titles ("The title is 50% of the work"[563]) that would set a marquee on fire. From brothers Mike and/or George: *I Was a Teenage Rumpot* (1960), *A Tub Named Desire* (1960), *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965), *The Devil's Cleavage* (1973), etc. From Jack Smith: the films *Buzzards of Bagdad* (1952), *Flaming Creatures* (1963); the live performances *Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis* (1965), *Penguin Panic in the Rented Desert* (1981), *Brassieres of Uranus* (1984), as well as the never-mounted *Hamlet and the 1001 Psychological Jingoleanisms of Prehistoric Rima-Puu* (1971), etc. Behind these titles lie the ruined traces of emotionally involving narratives and movie star mystique. For example, Mike Kuchar's *The Craven Sluck* (1967) is a bathetic[564] melodrama about a neglected housewife (Floraine Connors) who, over the course of the film's twenty-minute narrative: tries to drown herself in the bathtub because her callous husband (Bob Cowan) makes her "ashamed of her torso"; falls in lust with a tall, dark stranger in a lousy mod hairdo (George Kuchar; when the lovers kiss there is a cutaway to a dog pooping in the street); and is finally zapped into thin air by flying saucers (crudely scratched onto the filmstrip), following which the narrator takes a stab at

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[563] Jack Smith, "Statements, 'Ravings', and Epigrams," in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 152.

[564] Per Juan A. Suárez, "Camp . . . runs on bathos: on the incongruous fit of overdramatic colouring and congested instrumentation to threadbare, poorly produced images or trivial situations." Juan A. Suárez, "The Sound of Queer Experimental Film," in *The Music and Sound of Experimental Film*, ed. Holly Rogers and Jeremy Barham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 242.

the moral of the story: "we can't help but think to ourselves, God *really* . . . erruhh . . . came thr –

uuhh – knew what He was do – uuhh….." Hardly bothering with narrative, the productions of

Jack Smith place a premium on ostentatious mise-en-scène and movie star self-display. Smith's

storefront Hyperbole Photography Studio (circa 1957) welcomed denizens of the East Village to

pose for exotic tableaux, ensconced in the decadent finery of bargain-basement Veronese by way

of Josef von Sternberg.[565] In his film work, Smith staged junky costume-and-prop-driven

performances upon the thinnest narrative pretenses. *I Was a Male Yvonne De Carlo* (1970), for

example, finds Smith true to glamorous-indolent form, stretched out on a divan in a leopard-print

leisure suit, autographing a fan's 8 x 10 glossy, and, in a nearly two-minute close-up, puffing

exaggeratedly on a cigarette while grooming his eyebrows in a hand mirror.

In truth, the source of the failures in Smith and the Kuchars can be traced to commercial

cinema, more specifically to the cut-rate sets and overcooked theatrics of the Hollywood B-

movie. George Kuchar has circled as "A Defining Filmic Moment" the experience of being

moved to tenderness and gratitude by the awful acting in a Vera Hruba Ralston picture:

> What was the motivation that created these gigantic, moving billboards which broadcast
> to the world these icons of color coordinated creatures? IT WAS LOVE AND
> OBSESSION. The love of a producer for a European ice skater who fell on her face more
> easily on a soundstage than on the slipppry [sic] surface that spawned her notoriety.
> Picture after picture ruined by a lack-luster lovely leaden enough to sink the loftiest
> cinematic creations with her abominable acting. But I loved her too! If a producer was
> willing to star her in a picture then I could put my mom or my friend's moms in pictures
> too! Evidently all one had to do was to tell them how to open a door with some nice,
> atmospheric lighting in place and have the music come in at the right moment. All you
> needed was that – AND LOVE. Who cares if David Brian's thespian utterances whistled
> through his choppers like the north wind….he was crazy enough to memorize gibberish
> even I could write! Here were truly crazy people worth emulating because it made
> growing-up seem like fun: you can be in your fifties and still play-act, have fake fist
> fights and tumble on the floor with robust Czeckoslavakians [sic]. These were my kind of
> people from an exotic tribe I wanted to infiltrate. It was all make believe plus makeup

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[565] Smith's fascination with Veronese's paintings is cited in Lawrence Rinder, "Anywhere Out of the World: The Photography of Jack Smith," in *Art Life: Selected Writings, 1991-2005* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2005), 45.

and the window dressing of everything that was so obviously sad and vulnerable. Something very beautiful too. The human imagining the best way to make the worst look good.[566]

Take out Kuchar's DIY enthusiasm and the language here is remarkably similar to the purple prose in one of the foundational texts of the camp aesthetic – Jack Smith's still-dazzling 1962 ode to a genre movie queen, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez":

> Wretch actress, pathetic as actress, why insist upon her being an actress – why limit her? Don't slander her beautiful womanliness that took joy in her own beauty and all beauty – or whatever in her that turned plaster cornball sets to beauty. Her eye saw not just beauty but incredible, delirious, drug-like hallucinatory beauty . . . But one of her atrocious acting sighs suffused a thousand tons of dead plaster with imaginative life and truth.[567]

Smith and Kuchar agree on the beauty of failed silverscreen fantasy; only Smith dares to give it a political bent: "Why resent the patent 'phoniness' of these films – because it holds a mirror to our own, possibly."[568] Their respective cults of shoddy acting express more than schadenfreude at commercial cinema's blunders, as in Kenneth Anger's second career chronicling the tawdry secrets of "Hollywood Babylon." To make a movie even flimsier than a Vera Ralston vehicle is to pay tribute to moments of human triumph in the midst of crumbling artifice. Dominic Johnson has written of the "upper limit" of failure in Smith's films and performance art, "when the unstable edifice of his maximalism slips, toppling over into unmanageability and crisis," ultimately revealing "human possibility"; Johnson concludes that this limit is "derived from [Smith's] adoration of Maria Montez, and from studying her failings in the art of convincing acting."[569] This all goes to explain how artists like Smith and the Kuchars could nurture extreme obsessions with popular culture yet naturally link up with what Paul Arthur calls the

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[566] George Kuchar, *The George Kuchar Reader*, ed. Andrew Lampert (New York: Primary Information, 2014), 12.
[567] Jack Smith, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 25.
[568] Smith, 33.
[569] Dominic Johnson, *Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture*, Rethinking Art's Histories (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 40. For an analysis of failure in George Kuchar's work, see Paul Arthur, "History and Crass Consciousness: George Kuchar's Fantasies of Un-Power," *Millennium Film Journal* 20/21 (Fall 1988/Winter 1989): 151–58.

underground's "radical disengagement from the pressures and rewards of commercial cinema."[570] I would add that under these conditions of zealous performative failure, it stands to reason that even the comedy of Smith and the Kuchars is bound to flop with some audiences.[571]

When asked if he believed his work was "accessible," Smith replied, "Yes, to the very few."[572] The underground's interest in popular culture is not populist, but cultist. Hence, Kuchar's desire to join Vera Ralston's "exotic tribe," and Smith's worship of his personal canon of "secret-flix."[573] Again, one way of figuring the cultism of these queer filmmakers is through the lens of camp; per Sontag's foundational essay, "Camp is esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques."[574] Less charitably, we can recall Sarris' snarky summary of the underground ethos: "This is me, and if you don't understand me, something's wrong with you." In a note on the Maria Montez film *Cobra Woman* (1944), Sarris can't help mentioning the dread name Jack Smith, and takes the opportunity to accuse Smith of belonging to a mutant race of underground "moviepoids" – tribalists of defective cinema who

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[570] Arthur, "Routines of Emancipation," 20.

[571] Jack Smith's humour, perhaps indivisible from his most brazenly transgressive tendencies, does not always go over with audiences. I have my own horror story about teaching Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* – the filmmaker's self-described "comedy set in a haunted music studio" – to a class of confused undergraduate students, but I think Carol Vernallis' anecdote is much funnier: "In the upper-left-hand corner [of the YouTube projection] is a man holding his penis and shaking it vigorously back and forth. I suck in my breath. A student calls out 'Jesus.' I don't have tenure. I teach at a conservative university in a red state and it's the day we're doing student evaluations. Then I realize I'm okay. Students can't determine whether the main protagonist [of *Flaming Creatures*], dressed in a wedding gown, is a boy or a girl; blindsided, they never get much past the center of the frame. Thank goodness for fuzzy, degraded, ultracompressed footage." Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 153.

[572] Gerard Malanga, "Interview with Jack Smith," *Film Culture* 46 (Summer 1967): 15.

[573] Smith's full list of secret-flix – including not only Maria Montez films but, among others, "a gem called *Night Monster*, *Cat & the Canary*, *The Pirate*, Maureen O'Hara Spanish Galleon flix (all Spanish Galleon flix anyway), [etc., etc.]" – can be found in "Perfect Filmic Appositeness," 1997, 32. It is worth noting, as Smith himself does, that Montez was once a box office attraction embraced by a wide public. As people "grow up" and feel ashamed of what they once enjoyed, says Smith, "a nation forgets it pleasures, trash." Montez then becomes a forgotten idol of the secret-flix. Smith, 30.

[574] Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 275.

presumably count the Kuchars among their exclusive ranks.[575] Of course, Sarris' auteurism also makes him a cultist: he belongs to what Parker Tyler calls "The Big Experimental Film Cult," namely, those "movie buffs" who divine the supreme art of cinema in the work of commercial directors, whose personalities are pitted against the forces of studio control.[576] Whether Sarris would admit it or not, he and the moviepoids share a common belief that the art of Hollywood slips through *despite* Hollywood's standardized essence. The major difference is that Sarris' cultism primarily gravitates to a centre where the most personal cinema retains a high degree of professionalism and unity (John Ford, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock), while Smith and the Kuchars erect an altar to commercial films that, on a technical basis, fail to make the grade and thus fall to the fringes.[577] This celebration of failure, equal parts ironic and passionate, is an acquired taste – and therefore a specialized sense of humour – aligned with the "impoverished" ethic of the underground, whose approach to Hollywood here involves a scavenge for kindredly poor things to rescue from neglect.

WARHOLLYWOOD

A preoccupation with the debris of Hollywood is a hallmark of Andy Warhol's underground film work as well. It may be that Warhol appropriated some of his aesthetic-philosophical positions from Jack Smith, whom Warhol once called, with a characteristic air of bullshit, "just the only person I would ever try to copy."[578] For his film *Harlot* (1965), Warhol

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[575] Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 139. Ironically, Sarris' mention of Smith and Montez comes in a section of his book entitled "Expressive Esoterica," in other words, Sarris' personal selection of cultish favourites.

[576] Parker Tyler, "Orson Welles and the Big Experimental Film Cult," in *The Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 377.

[577] A significant area of overlap between Sarris and Smith's personal pantheons is Josef von Sternberg, though why this might be is a topic for another discussion.

[578] David Ehrenstein, "An Interview with Andy Warhol," *Film Culture* 40 (Spring 1966): 41. Warhol's reason for admiring Smith so much? "He's the only one I know who uses

cast Smith discovery Mario Montez in the role of Jean Harlow, the latter of whose erotic essence

is distilled by Montez to the art of suggestive banana eating. However much he borrowed from

Smith, Warhol fashioned his own philosophy about the value that could be wrought from the

"leftovers of show business":

> I always like to work off leftovers, doing the leftover things. Things that were discarded, that everybody knew were no good . . . When I see an old Esther Williams movie and a hundred girls are jumping off their swings, I think of what the auditions must have been like and about all the takes where maybe one girl didn't have the nerve to jump when she was supposed to, and I think about her left over on the swing. So that the scene was a leftover on the editing-room floor – an out-take – and the girl was probably a leftover at that point – she was probably fired – so the whole scene is much funnier than the real scene where everything went right, and the girl who didn't jump is the star of the out-take.[579]

A sentimental reader of this passage might take Warhol for a considerate type, attuned to the

plight of those cast out of cinematic Eden. But then again, "consideration," if it implies care, is

perhaps not the term to describe Warhol's treatment of the leftovers – or "superstars" – that

populated his Factory. As underground thespian Taylor Mead said of Warhol, "The more

destroyed you were, the more likely he was to use you."[580] Using leftovers makes economic

sense for Warhol: "If you can take [a leftover] and make it good or at least interesting then

you're not wasting as much as you would otherwise . . . It's also the funniest operating procedure

because . . . leftovers are inherently funny."[581] We'll have to take Warhol's word for it that

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color...backwards." Speaking more lucidly at a later date, Warhol chalked up Smith's influence to "the way he used anyone who happened to be around that day, and also how he just kept shooting until the actors got bored." Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 40. Smith appeared as a performer in several Warhol films in the 1960s. For an account of Smith and Warhol's collaborations, as well as a plausible explanation for what Warhol meant by Smith's "using colour backwards," see Callie Angell, "Batman and Dracula: The Collaborations of Jack Smith and Andy Warhol," *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 159–86.

[579] Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 93.

[580] Quoted in Cresap, *Pop Trickster Fool*, 165.

[581] Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, 93. Compare Warhol's remarks on leftovers to statements by Jack Smith: "Capitalism is terribly inefficient. The insane duplication, the insane waste, and the young only know what's put in front of them… But then, by experience, things are happening to you and you find out that this doesn't work. I

leftovers are "inherently funny" (surely, he's camping).[582] The irony is that what counts for

Warhol as waste reduction from a different angle comes off as flagrant excess – take, for

instance, the inordinate amounts of time, film stock, if not effort, Warhol invests in the

production of extra-long minimalist pieces like *Sleep* (1963), *Empire* (1964), and *Taylor Mead's*

Ass (1965). Warhol's minimalism proposes to leave nothing out, and hence could be read as a

challenge to the Hollywood tyranny of the "cutting room floor," not to mention an amusing,

faintly sweet redemption of all the boring parts of life Hollywood never tells you about. But this

minimalism has its unsightly maximal side as well: the unbroken look of Warhol's camera could

also tend to overindulge his superstars in their petulant histrionics, a case in point being the

agonizingly long take of "Pope" Ondine heaping misogynistic abuse on Ronna Paige in *Chelsea*

Girls (1966).[583]

By eschewing the concept of "outtakes," and by electing to fix his camera on ultra-

mundane or aberrant subjects, Warhol proposes to conserve what Hollywood or the larger culture

industry would thoughtlessly reject.[584] But Warhol's interest is to create his own "factory"

products, not simply to reproach Hollywood by recycling its waste. Warhol's relation to

mainstream production modes (at least prior to his entrée into commercial cinema proper) is

oblique but not strictly antithetical. Andrew Ross sees Warhol as a camp economist who creates

"surplus value from leftovers," mindful of "the low risks involved, the overheads accounted for,

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mean this is *not* productive." Sylvère Lotringer, "Uncle Fishhook and the Sacred Baby Poo Poo of Art," in *Hatred of Capitalism*, ed. Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer (Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e); MIT Press, 2001), 250.

[582] Ralph Rugoff offers an interpretation of Warhol's statement: "In a society fuelled by calculated images of success, part of the humour of using these 'leftovers' was that failure could be confused as the last refuge of authenticity." Rugoff, "Albino Humour," 101–102.

[583] Warhol on the physical violence of this scene: "It was so for real that I got upset and had to leave the room—but I made sure I left the camera running." Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 181.

[584] I realize that this places Warhol's film work in seeming contrast with his Pop art: though they both take mass culture as a reference point, a Pop work like *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) differs from the films in its deadpan similarity to a ubiquitous consumable, one that does not suffer any conceivable neglect. The "registration errors" and sheer volume of Warhol's silkscreens may, however, be recuperated as "leftovers" in a sense related to his film work. Rugoff pushes in this direction in his essay "Albino Humour."

and the profit margins expected."[585] Seeking to define Warhol's proximity to capitalist standards

of production, Peter Wollen draws a parallel between the features of the Warholian economy and

the "'caricature' elements" of Soviet mass production: in both we find "volume," "hoarding,"

and "inadequate quality control."[586] Warhol may run a factory line of failure, but never does this

line fail to produce, over and over again, in superabundance.

Being masters and indeed pioneers of camp sensibility, Smith, Kuchar, and Warhol each

has his allegiance to a ramshackle image of Hollywood, to a particular idea of how phoniness

and failure can be reclaimed as the acme of exotic glamour. In this way they may each embody

critiques of the mass system's tendency to marginalize that which is, under different lights, most

beautifully, pathetically, and hilariously human. Yet each filmmaker is also undoubtedly drawn

to the artificiality that is Hollywood's stock in trade. In artificiality, these filmmakers recognize

Hollywood's "star potential" and remake it in their own broken image. Parker Tyler has captured

the egoism of this arrangement: "This is a definition of one variety of camp: satire which is

funny because it make no effort to imitate anything well; rather it is a calculated semislander by

a parodist with his own sub rosa personality to exploit."[587] No doubt this comes awfully close to

describing George Kuchar's performance in *I, An Actress* (1977), as the eager impresario who

upstages the pupil he's rehearsing in the art of the scene-chewing monologue. But to the extent

that Tyler's statement applies to Kuchar, et al., it is in the qualified "*semi*slander": disparagement

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[585] Ross, *No Respect*, 170.

[586] Peter Wollen, "Notes from the Underground: Andy Warhol," in *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (London: Verso, 2008), 164. For an alternate reading of Warhol's Factory, see Annette Michelson, "'Where Is Your Rupture?': Mass Culture and the Gesamtkunstwerk," *October* 56 (Spring 1991): 42–63. In Michelson's view the Factory embodies, by turns, the Gesamtkunstwerk, carnivalesque *mésalliance*, and Adorno's culture industry.

[587] Tyler, *Underground Film*, 46. Cf. Manny Farber's review of *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966): "The sad thing about George Kuchar's soured talent is not so much the confusion, the skidding around in old movies, Jewish Mama humor, do-it-yourself Rabelais, but the curious assumption that the audience—particularly the In Society segment—are enthralled with the very smell of his rambunctious, galumphing Bronx personality." Manny Farber, *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, Expanded ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 249.

is only a partial aspect of these filmmakers' Hollywood appropriations, and it usually

intermingles with devotion.

The formation and expression of the Smith/Kuchar/Warhol sensibility around Hollywood

coincides with certain culturally significant developments. As Russell Ferguson has argued, the

aftermath of the Hollywood Antitrust Case of 1948 saw the crack of the studio-controlled "star

system" and a resultant shift in how Hollywood figures circulated through American culture.

Ferguson credits Weegee's photographs in *Naked Hollywood* (1953) with lifting the lid on a

more vulgar image of the movie business, one that was far from flattering of such stars as

Elizabeth Taylor (whom Warhol claims to have first immortalized in silkscreen because "she

was so sick and everybody said she was going to die"[588]). This was one sign that Hollywood was

becoming more accessible – to mockery, yes, but also to other forms of private use and

interpretation. Ferguson writes,

> Stardom became disengaged from its ties to the Hollywood studios and began to float
> freely through society. This change began to imbue the golden age of the Hollywood star
> with a nostalgic quality and created disjunctions in the very concept of the star. Spaces
> opened up in which it became possible for artists to make use of stardom's vocabulary.[589]

It is at the point of Hollywood's failure, then, that these underground filmmakers pick up and

begin their re-fashionings.[590] The personal cultism of, in particular, Smith and the Kuchars is

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[588] Quoted in Gene Swenson, "What Is Pop Art?," in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Anne Runyon Mahsun (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 121.

[589] Russell Ferguson, "Beautiful Moments," in *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; The Monacelli Press, 1996), 144. See also Warhol's professed attraction to the "vacancy" caused in the early 60s when "The Old Hollywood was finished and the New Hollywood hadn't started yet . . . Vacant, vacuous Hollywood was everything I wanted to mold my life into." Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 40.

[590] Benjamin Buchloh has a rather jaundiced view of the regenerative work Warhol performed – unwittingly or not – on the concept of celebrity: "with hindsight, one could argue that Warhol's iconography and cultivation of the 'superstars' of his Factory, originally pursued with the intention of democratizing the practices of cultural representation and subverting Hollywood hierarchies, not only exacerbated an already monolithic construction of the star as a collective screen of narcissistic projections, it initiated new and additional forms of mass-cultural star cults (e.g., the contemporary refiguring of the 'star' as pathological failure, as marked by public nervous breakdowns, as incompetent or infantile idiot)." Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Raymond Pettibon: After Laughter," *October*, no. 129 (Summer 2009): 18.

further nurtured by the availability of golden age Hollywood movies on television and in repertory houses.[591] Ann Reynolds writes of the importance of the latter screening situation to Jack Smith's artistic biography. Countering the superficial read of Smith as a camp figure, whose objects of obsession come down to matters of cliquish "taste," Reynolds argues Smith's obsessions were intensely "lived" – grounded in a personal history of close contact with popular culture of the past, shaped by the "continuous access" to movies afforded by New York's repertory theatres, and performed more or less autobiographically in Smith's art practice.[592]

These underground filmmakers cannot finally be characterized as hostile imitators of Hollywood; rather they are fantasizers of cinema energized by their errant visions of what movies once were and potentially could be. (Well, it's hard to imagine Warhol "energized" by anything.) Jack Smith conceives of the cinema as a private space where "it is possible to clown, to pose, to act out fantasies, to not be seen while one gives," in the direct lineage of Maria Montez.[593] George Kuchar describes his desire to enact "the Reader's Digest condensation of a Hollywood life. Every emotion, every excitement is on that screen. For an hour." Kuchar continues:

> Usually you go into a theatre and there are three scenes. I mean, three moments in the picture where it's intense, you know? I don't believe in that. I believe the motion picture should be intense from beginning to end. No movie I've seen has had that….a technique to inject that into my films, constant turbulence from beginning to end. So I have to go that way.[594]

One can hardly say, from the evidence of his films, that Kuchar failed in this ambition. Collecting pieces of Hollywood and exaggerating them into one's personal vision of pop cinema,

[591] A fuller account of the impact of television and revival houses on the "mass-cultural underground" is given by Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 123–26.
[592] Ann Reynolds, "A History of Failure," *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 187–209.
[593] Smith, "Perfect Filmic Appositeness," 1997, 30.
[594] Sheldon Renan, "Interview with the Kuchar Brothers," *Film Culture* 46 (Summer 1967): 49.

however rife with failure, is a core process of the underground moviemakers I have discussed above. A similar process obtains in the work of the found footage filmmakers I address below.

TO RELEASE UNSUSPECTED FLOODS OF MUSIC FROM THE GAZE OF A HUMAN COUNTENANCE IN ITS PRISON OF SILVER LIGHT

> Devotion is a love of one whom we wonder at.
>   – Spinoza[595]

Conspicuously absent from the fantasies of Kuchar, Smith, and Warhol is any direct appropriation from Hollywood, that is to say, the practice of found footage.[596] As far as the American avant-garde cinema is concerned, this practice is inaugurated by Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936). The famously introverted Cornell was an avid cinephile and collector of movie prints and stills. With the latter, he crafted assemblage art in tribute to such stars as Hedy Lamarr, Greta Garbo, and Lauren Bacall.[597] From a warehouse sale of silver nitrate Cornell acquired a 16mm print of *East of Borneo* (1931), a run-of-the-mill B-movie with an orientalist theme, starring the actress Rose Hobart. From this seventy-seven-minute print Cornell edited and spliced together his own nineteen-minute Surrealist film, excising large sections of the narrative to concentrate on images of Hobart's oddly subdued screen presence (this is not the school of Maria Montez over-emoting), here placed in a seemingly alogical, reiterative montage with other shots estranged from the film, as well as images taken from an unrelated reel in Cornell's

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[595] Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. E. M. Curley (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 106.
[596] They do however pilfer movie music and popular song for their films. For an analysis of sound appropriations in the work of these filmmakers, see Suárez, "The Sound of Queer Experimental Film"; and Carol Vernallis, "Avant-Gardists and the Lure of Pop Music," in *The Music and Sound of Experimental Film*, ed. Holly Rogers and Jeremy Barham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 258–82. Additionally, Warhol made use of appropriated television commercials in his film *Soap Opera* (1964).
[597] For analysis of Cornell's "portrait-homages" to these Hollywood actresses, see Jodi Hauptman, *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

collection.[598] Compounding the strangeness, *Rose Hobart* was to be projected at the eighteen-frames-per-second speed of silent films, with a blue-tinted filter attached to the lens. In the early 1960s, Cornell further introduced the now-accepted convention of screening the film to the soundtrack of a junk shop record called *Holiday in Brazil*, by Nestor Amaral and His Continentals.

Cornell's film does not immediately suggest itself as a work of humour. Brian L. Frye observes that, "Unlike most collage filmmakers, Cornell does not rely on cheap irony or *non sequitur*,"[599] and so one shouldn't expect amusing image juxtapositions to readily present themselves. However, when Cornell first screened *Rose Hobart* at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York in 1936, he grouped it with other found films in a program he titled "Goofy Newsreels," suggesting his work should be approached with a playful spirit. The later addition of Nestor Amaral songs also imbues *Rose Hobart* with kitschy flavour, perhaps more humorous for the fact that, as Holly Rogers observes, "the music appears thoroughly disinterested not only in the rhythm of the visual track, but also in its mood and atmosphere."[600] The incongruity of the image- and soundtrack – jokey music dancing across the surface of the visuals – performs the covert irony of making an item of obvious Hollywood kitsch like *East of Borneo* seem somehow deeper than we know – perhaps "sublime" in the sense that the "worst" films can be, per Ado Kyrou's description of the Surrealist's attitude.[601]

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[598] Lindsay Blair points out the little-cited fact that Cornell was working at Universal Studios and Columbia Pictures, doing "hack montage" or ad campaigns (in other words, extreme condensations of narrative), at the time he made *Rose Hobart*. He is thus another of our avant-garde filmmakers, like Morgan Fisher, whose experiences working in the industry conceivably inflect his approach to filmmaking. Lindsay Blair, *Joseph Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 152.

[599] Brian L. Frye, "Rose Hobart," Senses of Cinema, November 20, 2001, http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/cteq/hobart/.

[600] I don't find the soundtrack entirely discordant with Cornell's images; for instance, the lilting melody of Amaral's "Playtime in Brazil" complements rather nicely a lighthearted moment between Hobart and a monkey.

[601] Quoted in J. Hoberman, "Jack Smith: Bagdada and Lobsterrealism," in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 19.

As Adam Lowenstein reminds us, Cornell's film can be figured in terms of the Surrealist practice of "irrational enlargement," in which the "possibilities" of an object – for instance, a film – are explored through spontaneous (usually, group) inquiry into the object's tangential features.[602] In his analysis of *Rose Hobart*, Lowenstein expands upon the "irrational enlargement" thesis to argue that Cornell's reassembly invites a form of "collaborative spectatorship," whereby *East of Borneo*'s images are left open to a free play of associations and "stargazing" fantasy, collectively enacted by Cornell and the audience, and organized primarily by the gaze of Hobart herself. Thus, Cornell does not inscribe any contempt or ridicule for his Hollywood source, however much this source's plot (the site of its easier meanings) is ignored; rather, he reconfigures *East of Borneo* as "a meeting place for surrealist exchange," demonstrating the potential its images have to unlock processes of "ecstatic" meaning making.[603]

Filmmaker Ken Jacobs describes the impact *Rose Hobart* had on him and erstwhile friend and collaborator, Jack Smith: "We thought [Cornell] had directly broken through the drags on cinema, all the plotting that distracted from and justified these satisfactions of chaotic desire that really brought the customers in."[604] In this we hear an echo of George Kuchar's call for a "condensation" of cinematic excitements. Like Kuchar and Smith, Cornell composed his own ode to a silver screen ideal: "Enchanted Wanderer," Cornell's encomium for Hedy Lamarr (from which I've lifted the title of this subsection), may be considered, give or take some hyperbole, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez" *avant la lettre*.[605] If Cornell has less failure

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[602] For an example of this practice, see The Surrealist Group, "Data Toward the Irrational Enlargement of a Film: The Shanghai Gesture," in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), 121–29.

[603] Adam Lowenstein, "Collaborative Spectatorship -- The Surrealism of the Stars: From Rose Hobart to Mrs. Rock Hudson," in *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, and the Age of Digital Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 158.

[604] Quoted in Michael Pigott, *Joseph Cornell versus Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 10.

[605] Joseph Cornell, "'Enchanted Wanderer': Excerpt from a Journey Album for Hedy Lamarr," in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), 206–8.

on the mind than his underground counterparts, he is no less committed to the notion that

Hollywood's true pleasure and human trace is an imprisoned, frustrated thing, awaiting the

generous (if rather peculiar) attention of the avant-garde artist/adulator.

Again, we cannot ignore the critique implied by these Hollywood appropriations.

William Wees has argued, apropos *Rose Hobart*, that a "dialectic of fascination and

deconstruction . . . seems inevitably to result when avant-garde filmmakers confront the erotic

energy and nostalgic appeal of images of Hollywood stars."[606] As with Kuchar and Smith, the

object of Cornell's fascination is figured as something/someone for whom justice will be done

through a dismantling of Hollywood's regulatory procedures – that is, by taking apart the frame

in which this object was initially encountered. I have been arguing that these works of

appropriation contain humour, but this is not a humour that derives (at least not in full) from a

deconstructive exposure of Hollywood mechanisms, and still less does it dispense with fantasy.

In a brilliant reading of Smith and Warhol as authors of "gossip-images" of Hollywood – that is,

speculative and embellished star images that re-circulate in and give shape to queer

counterpublics – Marc Siegel challenges the "so-bad-it's-good" camp irony that has been

casually attached to these filmmakers. Siegel rather emphasizes the part *belief* plays in the

underground's appropriation of Hollywood – belief, that is, with a special concentration: "The

underground does not believe *in* the coherence of the illusionist fantasy worlds depicted in

Hollywood images, but in the power of an imaginative belief that ignites such lush fantasy

constructions."[607] To parallel Siegel's point, I would argue the humour of these filmmakers

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[606] William C. Wees, "The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 2 (2002): 6.

[607] Marc Howard Siegel, "A Gossip of Images: Hollywood Star Images and Queer Counterpublics" (Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2010), 132. I arrived at Siegel's dissertation late in the drafting of this chapter, discovering that our views on the Hollywood-inspired underground aligned in many respects. Had I known Siegel's work at an earlier stage, I imagine I would have mobilized his arguments to a greater extent than the lone citation here.

comes from a place of obsession and persistence with fantasy, and is related to the way private ideals can override, can let off sparks in, the already-idealizing machinery of popular culture.

Eve Kosofsky Segdwick's concept of "reparative" reading affords us a different way of thinking about camp humour, if we wish to persist with this category. Camp is perhaps commonly held to be a form of "paranoid" reading, one that consists in "mocking exposure" of the oppressions of a dominant culture, when it is not demonstrating a "self-hating complicity" with this same culture. Sedgwick argues that the association of camp with paranoia, however much it appears to fit the character profile of an artist like Jack Smith, does not help to account for what is most lively and definitive about the best camp performances: "the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the 'over'-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products," and so forth. Seen this way, camp is reparative when the desires it performs are "additive and accretive." As a queer cultural practice, reparative camp signals "that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self."[608] This aligns with Muñoz's point, not here an argument for camp, that although the work of Jack Smith is obsessed with failure, this failure is not about lack or weakness, but exhibits a certain "virtuosity that helps the spectator exit from the stale and static lifeworld . . . associated with capitalism or [to use Smith's epithet] landlordism."[609] The ecstatic joy of repairing a broken culture, into an image one can live with and take inspiration from (while remaining critical of that culture), is what feels essential and liberating about the humour in the underground practices

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[608] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 149–50.
[609] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 173.

above. The "dream" of cinema is, after all, a guiding light for each of these filmmakers, and their objective is not finally to disillusion the spectator.

What I mean to say is that these artists are not committed to the "demystification" of their appropriated materials, a form of paranoid reading in Sedgwick's terms. In avant-garde film, demystification is perhaps most closely associated with the practices of British Structural/materialists, ascendant in the 1970s, or after the underground era. For these filmmakers, mystification is another word for illusionism, the process by which viewers are drawn to identify with film fantasy, ignorant of the hidden apparatus (ideological, technological) that structures this fantasy. As Structural/materialist Peter Gidal writes, "The anti-illusionist project foregrounds mechanisms of cinema in the viewing, denying possibilities of an imaginary oneness of viewer and viewed."[610] To an extent, the failure artists I examined above qualify as demystifiers, insofar as the seams in their construction show, their works look visibly, indeed poorly, "made." Warhol's bored durations, a source of alienation for many viewers, make him an especially ripe candidate for the demystification school (Gidal has even written books about him, though not in praise of Warhol's boringness per se[611]). However, as I hope to have shown, these Hollywood appropriators do not attempt to spur critical rejections of Hollywood's artificiality, so much as translate aspects of this artificiality – the degree to which "Hollywood films are 'made' in the true sense of the word"[612] – into an underground value system. In the most cultish cases, the desire of the filmmaker is for nothing less than "imaginary oneness" with their fantasy image of the popular cinema. I take the pursuit of this oneness – despite the odds posed by the presence

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[610] Peter Gidal, *Materialist Film* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 61.
[611] Peter Gidal, *Andy Warhol: Films and Paintings: The Factory Years* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991); Peter Gidal, *Andy Warhol: Blow Job* (London: Afterall, 2008).
[612] Here, Jonas Mekas is our source: "What I like about Hollywood: its inventive artificiality. The best of Hollywood films are 'made' in the true sense of the word. They are artificial from beginning to end." Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 58.

of brokenness and failure, or by a soundtrack of kitschy samba – to be central to the humour of

these filmmakers.

ON SOME RECENT REMYSTIFIERS

> If the forms of provided commercial popular culture are not purely manipulative, then it is because, alongside the false appeals, the foreshortenings, the trivialisation and short circuits, there are also elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a re-creation of recognisable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding. The danger arises because we tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas they are deeply contradictory; they play on contradictions, especially when they function in the domain of the 'popular.'
>   – Stuart Hall[613]

This final section focuses on the work of two contemporary found footage artists:

Michael Robinson and Shambhavi Kaul. My grouping of these two artists gestures to a set of

commonalities in their work: the absence of direct, explicit critique of pop sources; an emphasis

on special effects as carriers of narrative; a return to sources of youth/past which carry an

unresolved meaning; and an ambivalence about popular culture that bears forth aesthetic

benefits. The objective of my analyses is to account for the place of humour in their respective

works of appropriation.

Erika Balsom has recognized a shift in the way found footage practice after the 1990s

negotiates pop culture, in particular Hollywood. Analyzing a host of mainly gallery works of

artist's film and video, Balsom finds that critique and enjoyment are no longer taken by artists as

mutually exclusive categories of engagement, as they were in the time of the "anti-pleasure

polemics of the 1960s and 1970s,"[614] out of which the demystification school arose. Rather,

artists take an ambivalent stance towards popular culture that signals not their indifference, but

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[613] Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 447–48.

[614] Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 123, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/concordiaab-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1773720.

their desire to "render visible the contradictory libidinal investments elicited by the culture industries."[615] For these artists, critique does not eliminate but exists side by side with the "affection, attraction, and amazement" that serve as pop culture's methods of coercion.

I take the work of Robinson and Kaul to follow in this line of critical ambivalence, and to be equally interested in the attachments pop culture secures through "affection, attraction, and amazement." In commenting about their work, both Robinson and Kaul show themselves sensitive to arguments against the hegemonic effects of pop culture. But rather than unmasking these effects, their work puts on full display the "mystifications" of pop culture – its magical, affective, spectacular appeals, chained to narrative – and moreover, through avant-garde devices, ensures that these mystifications function with heightened potency, uncanny effectivity. It is in this sense – mystification whose own first function and significance has been mystified, made obscure – that I propose Robinson and Kaul's videos perform "remystifications" of popular culture. Below I suggest ways in which this procedure could be productive of humour that is ambivalent about pop culture rather than mock-parodic.

MICHAEL ROBINSON'S EXPANSION PACK CINEMA

> Anyone who experiences exposure to media has in his or her memory a database of implanted images. At any time, any of these images can be invoked. The Archival Art Filmmakers use the recalled experience as part of their arsenal of techniques. From this perspective, any media-exposed person becomes equipped to be an Archival Art Filmmaker – all it requires is a desire to participate in a decision making process: keep this image, discard another, emphasize this image, underscore another. Herein lies the possibility to creatively cut and paste one's own experiences, which is a method to create a wish list for their future, since the use of imagination is a promise of cinema. These

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[615] Balsom, 123. See also Paul Arthur's remark on a new generation of avant-garde appropriators – such as Lewis Klahr, Janie Geiser, and Eve Heller – active in the 1980s and 90s: "The invocation of the unconscious by younger makers often implies that dreams are colonized by mass-cultural detritus or, to put it differently, that an individual's subjective experiences and fantasies are less determinate than second-order relationships with Hollywood or TV images." Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 162.

experiences are at once public, or media-implanted, and private, or self-selected images from the collective human image database.
– Sharon Sandusky[616]

Michael Robinson is a film and video artist who rose to acclaim on the experimental film festival circuit sometime in the mid-2000s. By the end of the decade, he was voted the tenth most important living experimental filmmaker in a poll conducted by *Film Comment*.[617] Though he has worked extensively with his own 16mm images, Robinson is perhaps best known for his appropriation-based pieces. These include works that fashion strange, hallucinatory narratives by recycling a stash of pop materials, including the American sitcom *Full House* (*Light is Waiting* [2007]), Italian giallo films (*Line Describing Your Mom* [2011]), primetime soap operas (*The Dark, Krystle* [2013]), 16-bit video games (*And We All Shine On* [2006]), and top-40 pop music (most of his works).

At first glance, this roster of sources looks ripe for ridicule, but it is hard to detect any such intention in Robinson's borrowings. Indeed, Robinson has spoken of his lack of an "agenda" in appropriating materials, insofar as that might mean an antagonism struck between the aims of his work and those of popular culture.[618] One of the apparent challenges Robinson has set for himself is to appropriate pop for an avant-garde context but do so in a way that consciously pushes against the requisite "distance" one might expect from this procedure. He has stated,

> Within experimental cinema there seems to be an established comfort zone of materials suitable for appropriation (home movies, Classical Hollywood, educational filmstrips, etc.) and much less use of anything with origins beyond the '70s, particularly pop music. After making *you don't bring me flowers*, whose elements fit very neatly into a hazy

[616] Sharon Sandusky, "The Archeology of Redemption: Toward Archival Film," *Millennium Film Journal* 26 (Fall 1992): 9.
[617] "Avant-Garde Poll," *Film Comment* 46, no. 3 (May/June 2010): 15.
[618] Quoted in Michael Sicinski, "Songs Sung Blue: The Films of Michael Robinson," Cinema Scope, accessed July 12, 2018, http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/features-songs-sung-blue-the-films-of-michael-robinson/.

'60s/'70s aesthetic, I pushed myself to start pulling from more awkward sources, things still on the cusp of being culturally embraced as nostalgic. And for me, that has meant using material from the late '80s and early '90s, which speaks to my own formative years, and has thus offered me a more productive approach to reconfiguration. In terms of how the elements are combined, I'm less interested in creating discord than in arranging the distances between things to let them harmonize in new and convincing ways, allowing for emotionally manipulative experiences that concurrently point to their own contrivance.[619]

With Robinson's generation (he was born in 1981), the cultural thresholds for "appropriate" appropriation have moved, but remain as defined by the "formative" period of youth as the exploits of the camp underground. In my discussion of Cornell, I noted how his appropriation tended towards an "opening" of *East of Borneo* to aspects of the subliminal and eternal usually sequestered by narrative flow; this means that Cornell's isolating and fragmenting strategies do not result in the attenuation of their recruited images' "hold" on the viewer (implying something like critical distance), but rather redirect or imbue these images with another, avant-garde power. Robinson's practice continues in this line, and I will argue below that the evident resistance to closed critical meanings in his work, together with his full exploitation of "manipulative" effects, can be meaningfully connected to his decision to work from an archive of "formative" pop culture.

A further remark to be made about Robinson's borrowing habits is that he seeks to place disparate pop elements in an experimental montage not to induce fracture but harmony – an admittedly warped kind of harmony, achieved through the construction of crypto-narratives and the eliciting of "claustrophobic" and "overwhelming"[620] emotional effects, these latter generated by deep, hypnotic immersion within the aesthetic/affective worlds of both pop and the avant-garde. In other words, as I will argue, Robinson does not wish for either formal system to fully

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[619] Quoted in Sicinski, "Songs Sung Blue."
[620] Michael Robinson quoted in Ananda Pellerin, "Michael Robinson [Interview]," Wheel me out, 2010, http://poisonberries.net/wheel_me_out.pdf.

overrule the other, and this is perhaps what makes the humour of his work, like its narrative and emotional appeal in general, so "difficult to explain but easy to understand."[621]

It would help to have one of Robinson's appropriation videos in front of us. *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us* (2010), made shortly after the death of Michael Jackson, recombines sounds and images from Jackson's music video "Remember the Time" (1991), Elizabeth Taylor's *Cleopatra* (1963), as well as such obscurely sourced cultural detritus as an Egyptian-themed ice skating show and a virtual tour through pyramids rendered in sub-par CGI. The piece begins with images of a costume designed for Jackson's final tour, a spectacular crystal-encrusted space-jacket decked out with enormous metallic shoulder pads, rotating as if on QVC display. In ghostly voiceover we hear Taylor's Cleopatra delivering a prophecy of fertility: "I am the Nile; I will bear many sons. Isis has told me." Suddenly we are soaring through a vast nightworld, against which the CG pyramids are visible only in vibrating, multicoloured outline, giving the appearance of a depleted form of anaglyphic 3D. We hear chanting: "A son shall be born to Isis! A son shall be born to Isis! Here shall he fulfill his destiny…" A woman's wounded wrist appears onscreen, then miraculously heals itself, and we are sent plunging down a corridor into the heart of one of the pyramids. On the other side we join Taylor's Cleopatra; she goes to an eyes-shaped peephole to peer at Jackson and his dance troupe in mid routine on the "Remember the Time" set (it should be noted that Robinson scores a laugh here by attenuating the Jackson hit so it sounds like the King of Pop is busting moves to a karaoke-style knockoff; the deformation of pop songs is a Robinson signature).

Some organizing principles for this montage have now been established, foremost the abundance of ancient Egypt kitsch. When more rotating concert jackets appear, we begin to

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[621] Craig Hubert, "Michael Robinson's 'The Dark, Krystle' in Chicago," Blouin Artinfo, February 20, 2014, http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1009871/michael-robinsons-the-dark-krystle-in-chicago.

understand these bejeweled wonders as modern-day mummy sarcophagi. For narrative-emotional

ambiance, Robinson mines the real-life, unlikely bond between Jackson and Taylor, making

perhaps greater sense of their relationship than the tabloids ever could by embedding it in an

imaginary/mythological context where symbols of wealth, transference, and immortality

expressively collage together. Midway through the video, Cleopatra howls in agony at the sight

of her son MJ spinning himself into a pile of dust to evade the pursuit of palace guards (avatars

for paparazzi?). She decides she cannot live in this world without him, and as we hurtle away

from the pyramid we see two blazing, computer-animated flares sent up into the night sky, the

spirits of Jackson and Taylor seeking mutual passage into the next world. As the video ends, we

have perhaps joined MJ and Liz in this afterlife (or are we at a ritual tribute to them sometime in

the future?), figured as a stroboscopic hallucination of ice dancers assuming "Walk Like An

Egyptian" arm poses.

I have reassembled as best I could the narrative of the video. Cleopatra's voiceover is

helpful in this respect, but since Robinson is adamant that his videos function as "narratives

created through non-narrative materials,"[622] and are never after "purely formal"[623] effects, most

of the narrative sense of *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us* must be grasped through a kind of

creative world-building, carried out by the viewer's free-associational interpretation of how the

disparate, manipulated sources serve each other in unvoiced ways. Robinson elaborates:

> I trust that the signifiers or triggers in the film—whether they are pop cultural, or
> mythological, or whatever—hold both obvious, surface-level connotations, and more
> residual, subconscious ones. Arranged within a film, they can operate through and across
> one another, in a kind of atmospheric web of associations. Liz Taylor is Cleopatra is Liz

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[622] Quoted in Cat Tyc, "Interview with Michael Robinson," INCITE!, January 1, 2010, http://www.incite-online.net/robinson.html.
[623] Quoted in Forrest Muelrath, "Medium of Sand," BOMB Magazine, accessed July 13, 2018, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/medium-of-sand/.

Taylor is Hollywood is Egypt is Isis is 30BC is 1963 is Liz Taylor is 2010 is alive is dead is alive, etc.[624]

One is reminded of Craig Baldwin's notion of the endless "opening out" of found footage, the multiplicity of possible meanings one can pull from images through "a kind of complexity and layering, layering, layering."[625] Robinson further explains that the "joy" of recombining materials in his work comes from "holding onto threads of narrative or emotional thrust though tenuous or unstable connections," a gambit which, if Robinson has his way, elicits surprisingly "haunting and powerful" moments for the viewer.[626] What this implies is that the sense or "truth" of Robinson's narrative seeks purchase, Hollywood-style (that is to say, in the style we know from *Cleopatra* or "Remember the Time"), through emotional manipulation, yet at the same time the means to this end are purely experimental – like attempting to recollect why a film moved you by dreaming about it.[627] Interestingly, Robinson has observed that the "portal" motifs in his work, when his narratives collapse time and jump between "parallel worlds," are probably best explained as "an embrace of the simple magic of cinema: one image dissolves into another, and the audience moves between two spaces."[628] Robinson's abstract narrative system thus feeds off the same psychological work expected of consumers of plain old Hollywood fantasy.

How does humour fit into this? What makes a Robinson narrative humorous (in addition to haunting and powerful) where *Cleopatra*'s may only be unintentionally humorous? Of course, the possibility for humour does not accidentally manifest itself; from the first image of Jackson's revolving crystal jacket set to Cleopatra's prophetic monologue, we might feel ourselves

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[624] Luke Goodsell, "Familiar Spirit – An Interview with Michael Robinson," 4:3, January 10, 2016, https://fourthreefilm.com/2016/01/familiar-spirit-an-interview-with-michael-robinson/.
[625] Craig Baldwin quoted in William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), 12. Baldwin's work is obviously a lot denser than Robinson's, and arguably less interested in layering to discover moments of intense, surprise affect.
[626] Quoted in Goodsell, "Familiar Spirit – An Interview with Michael Robinson."
[627] Cf. Ken Jacobs' observation: "*Rose Hobart* was a film as it was remembered." Quoted in Michael Pigott, *Joseph Cornell versus Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 9.
[628] Quoted in Goodsell, "Familiar Spirit – An Interview with Michael Robinson."

beckoned by Robinson into a play frame,[629] say one defined by the camp irony of bisociating

pure artifice and otherworldly transcendence. Yet somehow I doubt that this is the only logic of

humour functioning in this piece, since Robinson's layering technique leaves behind so many

associational residues. I am tempted to say that "tenuous and unstable connections" also suggest

experimental conditions for humour, something like a laboratory for jokes whose punchlines

(lines of "apt" connection) are left up to the viewer to decipher, like ancient Egyptian runes.

Perhaps there is something humorous about Robinson's insistence on holding "tenuous and

unstable connections" with *this* set of materials – not just the MJ and Liz kitsch, but less glorified

materials like the ice dancing and computer-simulated pyramid tours – and asking us to trust his

powers to manipulate cinema, when he knows full well how images can spill over into plural

meanings. In other words, maybe there is something agreeably self-deprecating about his

aestheticizing and narrativizing processes themselves: the avant-garde filmmaker kidding

himself by holding out belief that his meta-narratives can compete with Hollywood in making

good sense.[630]

More could be said for the way in which *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us* and other

Robinson pieces plunder material from what he labels his "formative" period. At this point I

would reiterate that Robinson's work belongs to an appropriation tradition that *re*-mystifies pop

images by prying open their latent power and exploring the fugitive meanings they hold (for the

artist, and potentially the viewer as well), rather than stripping them of their ability to enchant the

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[629] Cf. John Morreall's structure of humour:
1. A "cognitive shift – a rapid change in our perceptions or thoughts"
2. A "play mode . . . disengaged from conceptual and practical concerns"
3. Enjoyment of shift
4. A "pleasure at the cognitive shift is expressed in laughter, which signals to others that they can relax and play too." John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour* (Chichester, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 50.
[630] Robinson has spoken about the lack of self-seriousness in his work, even in his supposedly "cruel" films like *Victory Over the Sun* (2007): "I guess I see the damnation and aggression in the films as pretty humorous, poking fun at themselves more than anything else." Muelrath, "Medium of Sand."

spectator, or otherwise bringing them into explicit self-contradiction. Critic Mashinka Firunts offers a useful way of conceptualizing the narrative-emotional work performed by Robinson's videos, one appropriately tied to his cultural upbringing. Writing about Robinson's 2015 piece *Mad Ladders*, Firunts plays up the title's reference to a "downloadable content pack" for the 2012 video game *Quantum Conundrum*. Such packs, writes Firunts, "are periodically released to multiply the set of encounters a user can have in a game world after its narrative possibilities have been exhausted"; carrying this over, we could say that Robinson's *Mad Ladders* functions "like a downloadable content pack for popular media . . . suggest[ing] that we might yet expand and alter the outcomes of our collective narratives."[631] *Mad Ladders* shares similarities with *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us*, in that it unseals the mythological resonance hinted at in pop culture's rituals of worship. The central images of *Mad Ladders* are a series of flashy American Music Awards performances from the late 80s and early 90s, paired with shots of drifting clouds and audio from 8-bit Tori Amos covers and a YouTube vlog by a woman recollecting her religious hallucinations. Though Robinson claims not to have any nostalgic connection to the AMAs (or Tori Amos, from what I can gather), it is possible to speculate that his return to remystify this material from his formative years, to tease out the obscure meaning it contains ("Religion is where you find it, not just where you bump and grind it"[632]), is in some sense a way of exploring the latencies of a media-fed childhood. Robinson's appropriation work – his assembly of "atmospheric web[s] of associations" – seems concerned with what Aimee Rankin,

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[631] Mashinka Firunts, "Michael Robinson," Art in America, accessed July 13, 2018, https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/michael-robinson/.

[632] Michael Robinson, "Michael Robinson Introduces His Film 'Mad Ladders,'" MUBI, accessed July 13, 2018, https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/michael-robinson-introduces-his-film-mad-ladders.

following Fredric Jameson, calls the mass media's "subliminal memory trace, a kind of

phantasmatic plenitude that we can only construct after the fact."[633]

(Image 7: *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us*)   (Image 8: *Mad Ladders*)

Alejandro Bachmann provides a more up-to-date metaphor for Robinson's work,

suggesting that his appropriation strategy functions according to the techno-logic of "the cloud":

"It implies this idea of free floating availability of a memory that has no certain place or material

base."[634] As described here, the cloud can be likened to the memory-image-database that Sharon

Sandusky names as a precondition for the emergence of Archival Art Filmmakers. Within this

cloud float not just the dominant products of pop culture past but untold volumes of obscurer

materials, digital cousins to the detritus, "scrap heap," or "leftover" culture once cherished by

Jack Smith, Warhol, and company. The cloud has made cultural memory an ever-expanding

thing, and has provided a virtually unlimited storage space where this memory can be filed and,

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[633] Aimee Rankin, Dan Graham, and Silvia Kolbowski, "Legacies of Critical Practice in the 1980s," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, 1 (New York: New Press, 1998), 106. Analyzing found footage practice of the 90s, Paul Arthur criticizes the tendency to "slide into a postmodern relativism characterized by Fredric Jameson as the 'stylistic mask of pastiche, speech in a dead language'—heterogeneous heaps of interxtual fragments that deny historicism as they flaunt the collapse of temporal segmentation." Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 144.

[634] Alejandro Bachmann, "View Them for What They Are, Reveal What They Are Hiding: A Conversation with Michael Robinson," *Found Footage Magazine* 2 (May 2016): 78. From the way this interview proceeds, it is clear that Bachmann is mobilizing the cloud as a metaphor for the diffuse accessibility of artifacts on the Internet, rather than referring to any one particular instance of the "cloud computing systems" moderated by third-party service providers. For a material account of cloud networking and the interests it serves, see Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

moreover, made searchable. The possibilities for recombination at the fingertips of the artist/user

therefore seem endless. As we well know, however, just as personal memory is granted an

extended digital life, and begins to collect in the same cloud as other users' memories (including

those at the very fringes), it is subject to monopolized algorithmic processes of organization and

prognostication. Robinson acknowledges as much when he laments,

> Researching any topic or looking for materials online is becoming a more loaded,
> distracted, and existential pursuit, as the machines that anticipate what users *want* to see
> become more pervasive, streamlined and insidious. In other words, it's getting harder to
> find the really strange, tragic, barely-viewed videos on YouTube, and easier to become
> inundated at every turn with advertisements for items I decided not to purchase.[635]

The "wish list" that Sandusky believes can be generated by the Archival Art Filmmaker meets its

corrupted corporate counterpart in the "You Might Also Like" curation of our experiences,

operating both visibly and invisibly, across the Web.

Meanwhile, as Robinson recognizes, popular culture has entered an intensified stage of

ostensibly consumer-driven resurrection and expansion, the exemplary product of which may be

the "reboot": "*Star Wars*, *Twin Peaks*, Pee-Wee Herman, *Ghostbusters*, *Full House*, *The X-Files*,

Mad Max… all back from the dead this year (and I will watch all of it)."[636] By seizing control of

the desire to unfix its own effects, to reread and revise its own meanings, in perpetuity, popular

culture has all but admitted of its own instability, something it was once arguably left to the

avant-garde opposition to exploit.[637] While there is no question of my doing full justice to this

topic here, it can hardly be a coincidence that the rebooting/re-opening of key products of pop

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[635] Bachmann, "View Them for What They Are," 78.

[636] Robinson quoted in Bachmann, 78. I would also point to "transmedia" – the extension of pop narratives across many platforms, not just films or TV – as a related fan-friendly phenomenon, if not one with quite the air of "official" contribution as in the case of reboots.

[637] On the other hand, as Martine Beugnet and Jane Sillars argue, Hollywood has never shied from "reflexively" questioning its own effects. They write, "Hollywood nonetheless does not passively await the applied cinephiliac attentions of video art. It constantly and actively remediates and remixes itself. In Hollywood's most canonical productions, the transparent immediacy of the classic form often goes hand in hand with a good dose of reflexivity." Martine Beugnet and Jane Sillars, "The Reflexive Turn: Mediating and Remediating Hollywood: Introduction," *Screen* 58, no. 2 (June 2017): 200.

culture (mainly from the 80s and 90s) gains in rapacity at a moment when a generation of consumer-users have more tools than ever to appropriate, remix, and re-distribute this culture for their own purposes.

It is hard to imagine Robinson's pop culture expansions offering anything of worth to a conglomerate fan-sourcing its next franchise reboot. Robinson continues in the line of the underground appropriators discussed above by amplifying the buried promises and muted echoes of the mainstream, and by inventing an afterlife for the affective experience of popular culture. Further, Robinson introduces humour by mingling popular culture with the "strange, tragic, barely-viewed" detritus familiar to anybody who's trawled the "craptastic"[638] depths of the Internet: his videos contain not just blockbuster ingredients like Liz Taylor's *Cleopatra* and the American Music Awards, but also bad CG pyramids and blippy 8-bit covers of top-40 hits.[639] Thus, Robinson honours the proud tradition in avant-garde appropriation that grants unexpected dimension to fragments of popular culture through interventions that are markedly impoverished. The "leftovers" of culture provide the irritant that makes mainstream borrowings shine with underground lustre.

It is not merely the promise of pop culture that Robinson's work expands, however; it is also the threat. In interviews, Robinson is adamant that his work does not belong to the category of Internet "mashup" culture, contrary to similarities in such videos as *The Dark, Krystle*, in which Robinson compiles formulaic gestures from the TV show *Dynasty* in ostensible "supercut" fashion. Where Internet supercuts may be "fast" and "fun" demonstrations of pop culture's

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[638] I owe this term to colleague and preeminent trawler and peddler of Internet culture, Clint Enns. See, for example, Enns' Tumblr account, internetvernacular.tumblr.com. One could as easily substitute for "craptastic" the abject VHSthetic enshrined by the popular website *Everything is Terrible!*

[639] Film critic Nick Pinkerton has explored the sweeping aesthetic effects of the Internet media dump on everything from Ryan Trecartin's video art to Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *Ready Player One* (2018). Pinkerton further connects this phenomenon to the earlier "trash" aesthetics of Joseph Cornell and others. Nick Pinkerton, "Le Cinéma Du Glut," *Film Comment* 54, no. 3 (June 2018): 52–55.

serialized sameness, Robinson proposes to "exorcise" the demons of pop culture by working its

formulas to a pitch of hysteria or exhaustion. In this way, Robinson can be grouped with many

experimental appropriators – such as the Austrians Peter Tscherkassky and Martin Arnold – who

strive for eruptions of affect in their borrowings, moments during which the viewer may feel

overwhelmed with the sensation that familiar texts are purging themselves of strange, undigested

contents. For Robinson, this frequently entails drawing out an "evil spell presence"[640] in

originals by pressuring them with experimental techniques. In *Light is Waiting*, for instance, a

seemingly innocent moment in which a TV set is dropped by characters in the sitcom *Full House*

cracks open a portal to an alternate dimension, where violently strobing frame-flicker combines

with the Final Cut Pro "Mirror Effect" to envision a Tanner family vacation to Hawaii as a

kaleidoscopic acid trip, equal parts rapture and rupture.

We might further consider the role played by avant-garde techniques in unleashing the

"evil spell presence" of pop culture. Martin Arnold has likened his method of accessing the

Hollywood "repressed" in such films of his own as *Alone. Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (1998) to the

inscription of a "symptom":

> Hollywood cinema is, as I said earlier, a cinema of exclusion, denial, and repression. I
> inscribe a symptom into it, which brings some of the aspects of repression to the surface,
> or, to say it in more modest words, which gives an idea of how, behind the intact world
> being represented, another not-at-all intact world is lurking.[641]

Could we not say that it is the avant-garde itself – the "cineseizure" frame-stutter technique that

makes appropriated images of Mickey Rooney/Andy Hardy heave, pulsate, jitter in a stuck

groove – that plays the part of symptom in Arnold's cinema, indexing the "not-at-all intact" that

lurks at the heart of every superficially unified product of commercial culture? In Robinson's

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[640] Quoted in Pellerin, "Michael Robinson [Interview]."
[641] Arnold quoted in Scott MacDonald, "Martin Arnold [Interview]," in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, vol. 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 362.

Light is Waiting, it is what the artist refers to as "canned video effects" that enact the avant-garde symptom: these effects spill out after the TV set has been dropped and smashed by the characters in the opening scene of the video, a scene which Robinson excerpts with no alterations from an episode of *Full House*. Departing from more or less self-serious artists like Arnold, however, Robinson betrays an equal amount of deprecation about his avant-garde re-tooling as he does about the mainstream work he has exorcised. That is to say, we are invited to see his avant-garde intervention both as an act of ecstatic/horrific revelation and as a special effect emanating from a broken, defective machine, in its own way as "evenly stupid and profound"[642] as the family sitcom upon which it seems to confer an ominous power. If it is indeed the evil spell presence of *Full House* that Robinson is drawing into the light, what could it mean that this spell resembles an avant-garde movie?

SHAMBHAVI KAUL'S DE-PEOPLED FANTASIES

I turn now to the found footage work of Shambhavi Kaul. An India-born, USA-based artist, Kaul's found footage videos *21 Chitrakoot* (2012) and *Mount Song* (2013) played numerous experimental film festivals, including the Wavelengths program at the Toronto International Film Festival, where I saw them. The bio on Kaul's Vimeo page encapsulates her appropriation strategy rather well:

> Shambhavi Kaul's cinematic constructions conjure uncanny, science-fictive non-places. Described as creating "zones of compression and dispersion," her work utilizes strategies of montage and recirculation, inviting an affective response while simultaneously measuring our capacity to know what we encounter.[643]

"Recirculation" is a key term for Kaul; in numerous outlets, she has spoken of her interest in the way images from the pop culture imaginary circulate and transform across media, borders, and

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[642] Robinson quoted in Bachmann, "View Them for What They Are," 76.
[643] "Shambhavi Kaul on Vimeo," Vimeo, accessed July 13, 2018, https://vimeo.com/shambhavi/about.

memory. My concern is the mysterious and amusing form her appropriated images take through

Kaul's methods of recirculation.

21 Chitrakoot and *Mount Song* belong to a broad category of what we can term "removal

art." Of course, after a fashion, all appropriations are acts of removal: objects plucked from their

contexts are re-sited in others; in the process, a host of source elements are left behind. Yet there

is a difference in removal art. Whereas most appropriation art cues us to understand that

something is amiss in an original's re-presentation, in removal art a particular something is

plainly missing, right in front of us, and we are given to identify that missing thing at once. This

conspicuous absence performs a simple conjuring trick: as one feature of the appropriated object

goes into hiding, a previously hidden feature or set of features suddenly springs into view.[644]

Internet culture furnishes us with many examples of the humour that can be mined from

this practice. Sometimes it is a matter of bringing subtext to the surface. The popular web comic

Garfield Minus Garfield demonstrates how quickly Jim Davis' original comic strip is

transformed, though the titular removal of its cartoon cat, into an ongoing "journey deep into the

mind of an isolated young everyman [Jon Arbuckle] as he fights a losing battle against loneliness

and depression in a quiet American suburb."[645] Other removal operations reveal an object's

absolute dependence on gimmickry to coerce the audience's attention. A series of YouTube

videos made by a disgruntled TV viewer repurposes clips from *The Big Bang Theory*, America's

number-one sitcom, with the canned laugh track removed. As a result, the benign sitcom is

refigured as a disturbing chamber piece about a group of manic friends wisecracking in a void of

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[644] For theoretical elaboration of what I'm calling, after a suggestion by Clint Enns, removal art, see Emmanuelle André, "Martin Arnold on Walt Disney: To Show per via Di Levare (by Means of Subtraction)," *Screen* 58, no. 2 (June 2017): 210–17.
[645] garfield minus garfield, accessed July 13, 2018, http://garfieldminusgarfield.net/?og=1.

dead air.[646] There are readymade examples of removal art as well: the *X-Men Wolverine: Origins*

"workprint," leaked to the Internet in 2009 and resulting in jail sentences for the parties

responsible, stands as a hilarious reminder of how inept Hollywood special-effects extravaganzas

can appear if you catch them in the infant stages of their post-production, before all the millions

have had a chance to flood in.[647]

Kaul's main strategy of removal is de-peopling. Aside from the brief shot of a pair of

bare feet levitating out of frame near the beginning of *21 Chitrakoot*, the human disappears

without a trace in her found fantasy environments. The meaning of this disappearance does not

seem to bear any necessary relation to a logic functioning in the original text, as it does in other

de-peopled avant-garde works such as Naomi Uman's *Removed* (1999), which uses nail polish

remover to erase the female figure from a pornographic film, thus depriving the original of its

locus of visual pleasure; Radical Software Group's *RSG-BLACK-1* (2005), which edits all the

white characters out of Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001), reducing the United-States-in-

Somalia combat film from its two-and-half-hour length to twenty-two minutes of highly charged

racial(/ist) politics; and LJ Frezza's *Nothing* (2014), which strings together a clip reel of empty

spaces from *Seinfeld* (1989-98), the show notoriously "about nothing." A closer comparison to

Kaul's de-peopling is Cindy Bernard's photo series *Ask the Dust* (1989-92), in which the artist

photographs famous locations from such films as *The Searchers* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958), and

Bonnie and Clyde (1967), landscapes of cinematic memory that Bernard portrays as deserted and

thus haunted by the iconic bodies and events that once passed through them. Kaul's film *Night*

Noon (2014), shot on Super 16mm and incorporating no found footage, is set in Death Valley,

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[646] See, for example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKS3MGriZcs
[647] Thanks to Eli Horwatt for hipping me to the *Wolverine* leak. In a sure sign of the times, a recent trailer for the superhero blockbuster *Deadpool 2* (2018) appropriated this workprint humour.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mKIryGf2-o

around "a patch of sand that has circulated in cinema as everything from outer space to Egypt to current war zones."[648] Kaul presents this cinematic-everyplace as devoid of human forms; the desert is instead populated only by a dog and a parrot, a couple of "washed-up Hollywood pets" whose obscure encounter near the end of the film seems to stand for the last living trace of all the silverscreen drama that has circled through these sands.

In *21 Chitrakoot*, Kaul composes an image track entirely out of fragments of mise-en-scène from a fantasy television show that was widely popular in India and other parts of Asia in the mid-1980s.[649] It is exclusively these fragments – chromakeyed backdrops, phony sets, chintzy sound effects – that Kaul packages in "zones of compression and dispersion." Because Kaul has scrubbed nearly all human presence from these images, and thus excised any narrative familiar to us, we have very little guidance for critically negotiating the mystifying formal arrangement of the video, which nevertheless seems faintly to be telling us a story.

21 Chitrakoot begins with low-res images of a vast ocean, its waves crashing against a synthetic-looking shore. This is a picture of the sublime, as seen on TV. A composited stream of water begins to spout into the sky, threatening to empty the ocean. Sure enough, in subsequent shots the ocean floor has dried up. These shots continue to cut back and forth with the previous images of the ocean waves in all their roaring fullness. Perhaps the dry floor is here remembering its once-voluminous liquid past; or is the ocean recalling its original descent from the heavens, in rewind? Three more images from some unplaceable point in time intrude on the image track, each flashing a brief trace of life: a gold jar bobbing in a pool of water; a flock of birds emerging from a cave; a pair of naked human feet rising magically off the ground. The rise of these feet is

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[648] Shambhavi Kaul quoted in Charu Maithani, "NIGHT NOON by Shambhavi Kaul," Proprioception, October 2016, http://proprioception.in/night-noon-by-shambhavi-kaul/.

[649] From what I can gather, Kaul has not made a point of identifying the TV show from which *21 Chitrakoot* appropriates. However, it is not difficult to ascertain the likeliest source: *Ramayan* (1987-88), an epic fantasy series that set records for viewership in South Asia upon its initial airing.

matched in a consecutive shot of a mountainous rock formation (another composited effect) ascending from beneath the ocean waves, finally coming to a crest with a canned crunch on the soundtrack. Soon after, as if with no further prospects on the horizon, the mountain dips back below the ocean surface. The sun sets over the water, and we shift to a moonlit village for the next section of the video.

The images in this opening section rub against and resonate with one another, without indicating any clear causal sequence. Each image tends to possess its own distinct sonic character, which comes to the fore at the point of the cut, producing chatter and friction among the elements of the montage. The gold jar bobs in the pool with an exaggerated glug-glug noise; it is cut short by the fragment of human song that accompanies the flocking birds; this is interrupted by the whooshing noise of the human feet taking flight. Put another way, each element in Kaul's montage has an insistent *temper* of its own, and seems to act out this temper, or rather, to express the "inner itching" that Henri Bergson ascribes as the cause of automatic "gesture" as opposed to more conscious "action."[650] Tempers flare between elements later in *21 Chitrakoot* when, in a spooky forest setting, a soaring arrow meets first a flying boulder then a lunging tree trunk in a mid-air duel. Perhaps the arrow is a taming force, for shortly after we see arrows multiply from the eye of a cosmic bang, and shoot across a series of chromakeyed skies, until at last the arrows seem to explode in a cloud of mist, which cascades down from the sky to water the four corners of the earth. The trickling stream from a mountain leads us to the final scene, a video composite of ducks lapping around in a chromakeyed pond, while a flock of painted birds watch frozen on the shore.

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[650] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Dover, 2005), 98.

Mount Song is a more wholly integrated piece of appropriation, not nearly as cheesy-Brechtian as *21 Chitrakoot*. *Mount Song* borrows its images from Hong Kong genre cinema of the 1970s and 80s,[651] whose sets and special effects have a pronounced artificial character but also a larger budget to prop up their fantasy. Kaul's sound design is given a more sinuous and finessed mix this time. The video opens at nightfall over an empty village and its surrounding forest environs. Unseen presences bustle in this ostensibly abandoned place; the soundtrack is composed of whistling winds, slow hisses, and low thunderous rumbles, punctured by a sudden sharp metallic jangle which rattles the trees, and a phrase of musical score that will play as a motif at moments of eerie repose throughout the video, to entrancing effect. As we continue into a section in which a low blanket of mist creeps across a chamber floor, under a door, and into a nearby garden, the video is preparing us for an experience perhaps more hypnotic than funny. Kaul disrupts this passage with a burst of pyrotechnics: bright fireworks and puffs of smoke are followed by a rapid montage of explosions in the village, and a series of cuts of bamboo shoots firing into sockets in the village floor. All is quiet again for a moment; birds rustle in some part of the village, as though bracing for the next random act of self-combustion in the village (how long have these poor birds been dealing with this exploding architecture? The tattered doors in the village suggest it's been a while). In mid-air, an illuminated outline of a birdcage forms, and from it real birdcages drop and release their inhabitants. Is this how the birds are delivered to this place? More lanterns explode in the village. A bird appears born of pure light, thrashing around

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[651] This is not insignificant. Kaul has remarked that both *21 Chitrakoot* and *Mount Song* repurpose pop culture from countries coming through, but not quite distanced from, a colonial past. As Kaul says of the Hong Kong genre sets in *Mount Song*, her images are appropriated "from all sorts of fantastical sources to become much more than the 'ancient East' while still remaining readable within cinema's distributive networks as a generic version of it." These sources speak to the "loss of an imagined ideal place," and as such they gesture to a fantasy fulfillment in the imagination of the viewer. One of Kaul's stated goals is to reproduce an attachment to this fantasy, for "the sake of a re-experience." Quoted in Shanay Jhaveri, "In Focus: Shambhavi Kaul," Frieze, accessed June 25, 2017, https://frieze.com/article/focus-shambhavi-kaul. I have little experience of these films, and no working knowledge of the popular Indian TV show featured in *21 Chitrakoot*, so I imagine some of the comic pleasure of them is lost on me. I'm afraid I must speak of them in abstract terms as effects-driven spectacle.

frantically until falling to the floor, its light burning out to reveal a dead mechanical toy. The side

of a mountain explodes somewhere and a flying orb of light, possibly a bird, escapes from it.

From the once-more quiet village, and through the sky, pass more glowing orbs/birds of light.

They make their way to a cave, which is filled with mist and coloured lights and echoes of

vaguely sci-fi noise frequencies. The central image of this final section is of a wall in the cave

swinging shut, in fact by all appearances a mirrored door, in whose reflection we see a trompe-

l'oeil of an exit from the cave. We slow zoom in on this mirror, significantly. At last, some

explanation for all that has transpired in the video!

The best analysis of Kaul's humour to date is given by critic Ryan Holmberg. In the

absence of the human, writes Holmberg, Kaul's videos comprise "haunted nurseries" in which

"special effects, sets, and props appear as autonomous and self-animating phenomena. Doors

open, clouds expand, trees shudder, buildings explode, glowing birds fall—as if they are

themselves statements rather than contexts or conjunctions."[652] But, even as we sense something

philosophically pertinent in Kaul's arrangement of these materials (object-oriented-ontologists

could have a field day with this stuff), Kaul never ceases to show us just how fantastically fake

these objects are. Through a balance of "deft technique and open artifice," writes Holmberg,

Kaul "is careful to maintain that look of magic, in which the genre codes are still functioning

even while they are being laid bare." This is the "deeper level" of the comic in Kaul's videos: we

invest in these patently artificial settings and special effects (by the standards of today's f/x, they

look exceptionally cheap), because Kaul's "magic show" presentation is delightfully convincing.

Convincing as what? If I have included Kaul's work in my discussion here, it is because I

have been convinced that it resonates with avant-garde matters explored in this chapter. Her

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[652] Ryan Holmberg, "Shambhavi Kaul's Haunted Nursery," X-TRA, accessed November 26, 2017, http://x-traonline.org/article/shambhavi-kauls-haunted-nursery/.

concentration on artificial-looking "effects" at the expense of all else recalls, on one hand, the

glorying-in-the-cheap practiced by the underground camp discussed above. Yet, by turning over

agency to the special effects of the mainstream, rendering these effects "autonomous and self-

animating phenomena," Kaul (inadvertently) performs a reclamation of sorts: the special effect

that the avant-garde becomes in popular culture recirculates as the special effect that pop culture

unwittingly lends to the avant-garde. A major part of the comic satisfaction of Kaul's videos is

the spectacle of effects turning loose and playing out their own obscure dramas beyond the

strictures of commodified use. We wonder how we could have ever assumed we "knew" such

fantastic objects in our encounters with them in the mainstream.[653]

I would insist, however, that Kaul's avant-garde recirculation does not utterly eclipse

what is familiar and affecting about popular culture. How could it, when it assembles its sound-

and image-scapes (one presumes) almost exclusively from pop fantasy worlds? Beyond that, as

in Robinson's videos, Kaul has organized her montage in intensities and dispersions of affect and

spectacle that seem to invite the spectator to construct crypto-narratives of them. In other words,

on some level – or perhaps better to say, frequency – these videos seek to "work" for the

spectator in ways that call back to the attachments we make with popular media. In an article on

the appropriation films of Martin Arnold and Peter Tscherkassky, two contemporary avant-

gardists who arguably branch or act as a gateway between the avant-garde and the mainstream,

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[653] Am I losing my oppositional sense? In my ears are ringing the words of Andrew Cole: "Ours is a time when schools of interpretation ask us to personify and caricature objects as autonomous and alive—whether they are the objects who 'speak' in the new so-called vibrant materialism, or objects who fuss and act up in actor-network theory, or objects with 'primitive psyches' in object-oriented ontology. Is this really the way to think at this moment? For Marx, at least, this way of thinking about objects is what keeps capitalism ticking. To adopt such a philosophy, no questions asked, is fantasy—commodity fetishism in academic form. To identify such philosophy as the metaphysics of capitalism is theory, ever attentive to history's impress on our imaginations, whatever we may dream." Andrew Cole, "Those Obscure Objects of Desire," *Artforum International* 53, no. 10 (Summer 2015): 323.

Similarly, Thomas Crow has spoken of Surrealism's gift to modern advertising: "that now familiar terrain in which commodities behave autonomously and create an alluring dreamscape of their own." Thomas E. Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 36.

Michele Pierson proposes that "special effects" in their films "communicate in ways that sneak under spectators' conscious wrestling with these films' high degree of indeterminacy, to provide anticipatory feelings of recognition and insight that don't necessarily cohere into readings."[654] This helps to account for Arnold and Tscherkassky's relative popularity or accessibility with non-specialized audiences; their films do not ask the spectator to make sharp distinctions between the "art" of their work and the "entertainment" from which it borrows. In Tscherkassky's *Dream Work* (2001), it is as much the avant-garde's traditions and practices as those of the popular cinema that are explored and wondered about. For Tscherkassky – and I am here tentatively claiming the same for Kaul and Robinson – the popular and avant-garde cinemas may not historically (and today) share the same institutions and spaces of production, yet "each is . . . inscribed with the conscious and unconscious memories, desires, and aspirations of the other."[655] There may be, I have argued, something humorous to be gleaned from this.

(Image 9: *21 Chitrakoot*)   (Image 10: *Mount Song*)

It should go without saying that the goal to attract, amaze, and affect an audience is not the exclusive property of popular culture. Appropriators like Kaul and Robinson harbour no

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[654] Michele Pierson, "Special Effects in Martin Arnold's and Peter Tscherkassky's Cinema of Mind," *Discourse* 28, no. 2/3 (Spring & Fall 2006): 30. Michele Pierson argues that Arnold and Tscherkassky use "special effects" to articulate processes of mind and to prioritize affect as a source of knowledge and spectatorial reflection.
[655] Pierson, 45.

particular animus towards the artificial magic of effects-driven entertainment; they merely

suggest that this magic could be put to other use, could inspire new insights or deeper curiosities

if deployed on terms set by the avant-garde. As Alexander Horwath has written of the found

footage works of Peter Tscherkassy, instead of spurring a hostile knowingness about the

mainstream perhaps Kaul and Robinson invite us "to laugh *with* these found movies, to be

beautiful with their beauty and to create new knowledge from their knowledge and their

unconscious."[656] The school of demystification evidently has not had the last word on "movie

magic."[657] It could be that the problem lies not in the achievement of presumed "oneness" with

what we see, but in Hollywood/kitsch art's integrated, profit-driven formula for effecting such a

oneness.[658] Stan Brakhage once wrote that the cinema has a "beginning in magic" thanks to

Méliès, and that the "trick-and-effect,"[659] which induces magic, remains a constant through so

much of creative expression that compels our convictions and makes us wonder. The "trick-and-

effect" is not here synonymous with the con of commercialism. The secret it hides is not a rigged

system.

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[656] Alexander Horwath, "Singing in the Rain. Supercinematography by Peter Tscherkassky," in *Peter Tscherkassky*, ed. Alexander Horwath and Michael Loebenstein (Vienna: Austrian Filmmuseum, 2005), 34.

[657] For a look at how works of demystification can change in meaning over time, see T. J. Demos, *Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, One Work (London: Afterall, 2010). Discussing Birnbaum's pivotal work of appropriation video, which by the artist's own lights attempted to "demystify" the stereotypes and special effects of TV's pop-"feminist" *Wonder Woman* (1975-79), Demos posits the presence of something ambivalent or even affirmative in Birnbaum's re-deployment of the icon of the "strong woman," which may have sat complexly alongside, but been overshadowed by, the video's criticality in the time of its making.

[658] I am speaking polemically here, exempting any consideration for the creativity found in commercial work. In her book *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Michele Pierson gives a fair hearing to the array of aesthetic functions that Hollywood special effects serve for creators and audiences. The appropriation work I have looked at attests well enough to the notion that space for inspiration and imagination can exist within the commercial context.

[659] Stan Brakhage, "Corrected Text of Metaphors on Vision," in *Metaphors on Vision*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives; Light Industry, 2017), 115.

Thomas Elsaesser proposes an alternate name for found footage films: "post-production films."[660] In the case of appropriations from popular film and television would not a more accurate title be "post-post-production" films? For it is in the space of post-production that the so-called "mystifications" of popular media are secured – where narratives are polished and effects fully integrated, where the package is tweaked for optimum audience persuasion. The avant-garde appropriator comes in after these facts of post-production, undermining Hollywood's belief that it has effectively "finished" its products. Hence, the example of Julien Prévieux's aptly named *Post-post-production* (2004), an appropriation video wherein the artist critiques the James Bond extravaganza *The World is Not Enough* (1999) by adding *more* special effects to the entirety of the film – primitive-looking CG fireballs, avalanches, tidal waves – until the spectator's attention is completely surrendered to the aesthetics of action-movie destruction as such.[661] As my other examples have intended to show, undermining popular entertainment does not always mean a weakening of this entertainment's methods of spectatorial engagement. Sometimes, what popular culture calls for is mystification appropriate to our most curious desires: this, I have suggested, is the premise of much of the humour and mischief found in the appropriation work named above.

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[660] Thomas Elsaesser, "The Ethics of Appropriation: Found Footage Between Archive and Internet," *Found Footage Magazine* 1 (October 2015): 32.

[661] For a discussion of *Post-post-production*, see Martine Beugnet, "An Aesthetics of Exhaustion? Digital Found Footage and Hollywood," *Screen* 58, no. 2 (June 2017): 218–28.

CONCLUSION

As the reader will have gathered by now, this dissertation is not a survey of humorous practices in the avant-garde moving image arts, nor is its scope international. While it has been my pleasure to receive recommendations on a wide range of humorous films and videos from colleagues over the years, I have not attempted here to take a sweeping view of the field, but to chart and theorize humour in its modes of appearance at pivotal junctures, or heightened moments of debate and controversy, in the history of these media arts. In short, I have taken humour as an alternative lens through which to re-view the prevailing histories and hopes of, primarily, American avant-garde practices.

I recognize, however, a certain irony in this approach. There are no doubt countless unsung comic talents in experimental film and video whose commitment to humour in some way marginalizes their contributions to the history of their arts. By failing to catalogue these marginal figures – to conduct more primary research that would entail recovering forgotten artists and works from ephemeral screening programs, defunct distribution guides, and the like – I have in many respects observed the historical status quo, and thus neglected the vital role humour can play, per Bakhtin's path-breaking work, in fashioning vernacular cultural histories. So it is that, while queer avant-garde humour may feature prominently in my analysis, it is yet the queer humour that finds a place in the major histories and discourses I am gravitating towards. The reader will have to take it on trust that, despite the blatant canon-mongering of this dissertation, I support the project of loosening up and decentering the histories of avant-garde "cine-video"[662] through humour. As efforts in this direction on the film front, I would cite two screening events of recent years: "Stop It You're Killing Me!" (August 2013, New York City), a program of

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[662] I came across this handy compound term in Yvonne Rainer's writings, and I wish I'd made use of it sooner. You can find it in Yvonne Rainer, *A Woman Who: Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

lesser-known comic works from the collection of the New York Film-Makers' Cooperative[663]; and "Who Says the Avant-Garde's Not Funny? Unexpected Films from the Canyon Cinema Collection" (November 2017, Toronto), a selection of humorous films in modes that cover "feminist formalism, punk documentary, pop culture funny, and intricate animated performances of bodies, identities, and objects," curated by Antonella Bonfanti and Tess Takahashi.[664] Each of these events has the added appeal of featuring films by majority women artists.

What other directions could one take in a project on avant-garde humour? The place of humour as a rhetorical strategy in artist writing and commentary seems to me ripe for further investigation. This could be positioned in larger discursive histories of artists talking about their work. What functions are served by supplementary texts by artists; what points of access or obstacle do they pose when they evince humour? What are the histories of speaking humorously about one's work? On a related note, I feel I have inadequately accounted for the comical side of Jonas Mekas' hyperbolic publicity machine; if one were to peruse the advertisements for screenings at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque in the 1960s, for example, one would find evidence (dig the exclamatory sales pitches!) to suggest that Mekas' showmanship was often as playful as it was polemical.

In terms of films and videos, there remain vast territories of humour left unexplored in this dissertation. Avant-garde animation, to cite a glaring example, has been shortchanged here. Going by P. Adams Sitney's evaluation, "The cartoon has always been an embarrassment in the avant-garde cinema."[665] It is true that some ostensibly humorous animators, such as Red Grooms, Robert Breer, and Lewis Klahr, sit comfortably at or near the centre of the avant-garde film canon; still there may be some lingering prejudices around accepting animation's closeness to

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[663] The program listing can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/events/322759687859440/
[664] See: https://www.facebook.com/events/1935869319995580/
[665] P. Adams Sitney, "Point of View: Rear-Garde," *American Film*, July-August 1985, 61.

cartoon and therefore to entertainment and child's play (this is oddly not something that hamstrung the underground performer's reputation). These matters are speculative, but some observation of how avant-garde work is programmed today suggests to me that animation is not a highly regarded category among the most official of tastemakers. Has the humour of animation played any role in this? Is there a queer history of failure to be written about avant-garde animation, as Jack Halberstam has written of popular animation?[666] There is, of course, a risk of overstating the case of humour in avant-garde animation, in, say, mistaking delightful appearances for comic instances. It is also not always clear where animation "belongs" in the avant-garde; how does it communicate with live-action bodies of work? And how should we organize animation as a category – how might a discussion proceed that includes such artists as Jane Aaron, Sandy Moore, George Griffin, Bruce Bickford, Pooh Kaye, Jodie Mack, and Barry Doupé, among many others?

All along I have kept relatively quiet on the issue of laughter. On one hand this is because, as I have said, coupling humour and laughter is problematic and liable to lead to undue judgments working outward from response. On the other hand, there must be some room to account for the fact that, when a group of my students watched Joyce Wieland's *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968), the response was mostly muted, whereas when they saw Cecilia Condit's *Possibly in Michigan* (1983), reactions were immediate and uproarious. Now, there are any number of factors in play here, and the comparison is probably unfair: Wieland's is the older, 16mm work, it has less narrative and "jokes"; Condit's work is from the 80s, with a videotape aesthetic that students recognize as being revived and worked through in cultural products today, etc. But the explosiveness of the laughter at *Possibly in Michigan*, the surge of

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[666] See Judith [Jack] Halberstam, "Animating Revolt and Revolting Animation," in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 27–52.

"sudden awareness" that attended it (and I hope it wasn't merely a sign that the students were desperate for a laugh), is a reminder that laughter is, at the very least, "epistemologically significant."[667] It provides some key to the presiding knowledges of our epoch. If we wish to understand what's happening around us now, it may be a good idea to ask why students with no specialization in avant-garde cinema might have an easier time "getting" the humour in a Shana Moulton or Jacolby Satterwhite than in a Michael Snow or Owen Land. To this end, a consideration of how the Internet is reshaping concepts of the "avant-garde" may be in order.

Finally, what of my own laughter? Does it disappoint the reader to learn that I, the author, have not laughed at many of the art works discussed in this dissertation? (For example, I can't recall ever laughing at the Pop art examined in Chapter 3; though, incidentally, a recent viewing of *Portuguese* Pop art did the trick.) I am not exactly convinced of what good it serves to position my own laughter in my research, beyond some expression of taste or autobiography. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to log my gratitude in some way for certain avant-garde works at which I've decisively laughed out loud, and to see where I am led when I follow this laughter. Thus, I conclude with remarks on two videos that still have the capacity to send me into fits, for reasons that, I assume as well as hope, will never be entirely transparent to me.

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I first saw Guy Maddin's video installation *Bring Me the Head of Tim Horton* at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival.[668] Playing on loop in an inconspicuous corner of the tiff Bell Lightbox, the video promised Maddin's own exclusive, behind-the-scenes look at the making of

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[667] Catherine Conybeare, *The Laughter of Sarah: Biblical Exegesis, Feminist Theory, and the Concept of Delight* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 102. "That being *suddenly aware* is crucial: it is another way of saying that laughter is epistemologically significant." Emphasis mine.

[668] This installation was programmed in the festival's Wavelengths sidebar of avant-garde offerings. The video is co-directed by frequent Maddin collaborators Evan and Galen Johnson. I foreground Maddin here for his fame, I admit, but also because of his starring role in the video.

actor-director Paul Gross' blockbuster Canadians-in-Afghanistan war film *Hyena Road*, which

happened to be receiving a gala premiere at that year's festival. Maddin's video opens with a

quote from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, from there launching into a grandiloquent narration

delivered, to my ears, by a text-to-speech bot with a pompous British accent (sample prose: "Is

this road hurtling towards us, as we, slouched peaceably on the abandoned chesterfield of

ontology, consume it?"). Maddin takes us on location in the Jordan desert where *Hyena Road* is

being filmed. It is never satisfactorily explained why Paul Gross has agreed to grant Maddin this

access, but he is shown to exhibit almost total indifference to Maddin's presence; meanwhile,

Maddin's making-of – "a Trojan horse within a Trojan horse" – positions Gross' moment of

triumph in dispiriting contrast to the state of Maddin's own career and finances. We find Maddin

lying in the sand as a deep-background extra, a "Taliban soldier" with pink skin baking under the

hot sun, wondering bitterly in voiceover how his career has come to this. On the slight upside,

Maddin plans to use the shoot to work covertly on his own projects; to this end, he has brought a

(woefully undersized) green-screen with him to the desert, to get some quick pickup shots of

Maddin walking against a wintery Canadian backdrop. Later, Maddin lights upon the idea to

make his own avant-garde version of *Hyena Road*, by shooting combat scenes from Gross' film

at an extreme distance in stark black and white; eventually these images become saturated with

colour filters as the soldiers begin to fire laser beams at one another, the desert suddenly

transformed into a sci-fi landscape set to a soundtrack of throbbing techno music. A still later

passage in the video returns us to the British text-to-speech bot, whose purple phrasings on the

nature of sight accompany test footage of Paul Gross captured by a drone camera.

  I laughed helplessly as I watched this installation. At some point, a Lightbox security

guard came over to notify me that I was the first person he'd observed laughing at the video; he

was quite sure it wasn't meant to be a comedy. Lessons like this remind me never to take for granted the communicative capacities of avant-garde humour, never to exaggerate its reach. The site-specific nature of Maddin's video only increased my comic pleasure; for others, this siting may have betrayed a befuddling lack of context.

There is more than anti-industry satire in *Bring Me the Head of Tim Horton*. I suspect a lot of my appreciation for the video's humour has to do with some working familiarity with Maddin's Winnipeg background. As we venture out beyond the major hubs of avant-garde film activity (e.g., New York, San Francisco, Toronto), we are bound to encounter regions where local film scenes have developed their own sense of homegrown humour. Winnipeg is a significant case in point. It is difficult to say from outside to what extent the success of Maddin has rubbed off on the city's humorous regional style – that trademark hybrid of self-mythologizing and self-deprecating pseudo-auto-prairie-ethnographic elements – and to what extent this style has emanated organically from collective folk expression. It is a tribute to Winnipeg's folkloric charm that there exist not one but two experimental documentaries reconstructing the night in 1985 when hometown hero/villain Burton Cummings (frontman of the Guess Who) was cracked over the head with a beer bottle in a north end 7-Eleven. *Negativipeg* (dir. Matthew Rankin, 2010) intersperses a dramatization of the night in question with the firsthand account of the not exactly penitent assailant, Rory Lepine, who served jail time; *Fahrenheit 7-Eleven* (dir. Walter Forsberg, 2010) explores Cummings' (in)glorious reputation among Winnipeggers, alongside a variety of reenactments of the bottling incident adapted from local legend, all staged in a 7-Eleven stocked profusely with boxes of Old Dutch potato chips.

Gregory H. Williams has recently commented on the ways in which contemporary artists, up against a powerful globalized art market, continue to resist the false hope of "universality"

through "the situatedness of humor" in their work.[669] While most avant-garde filmmakers need not stress over their role in the marketplace, the situatedness of humour is one way they remain strongly connected to communities of fellow makers and avoid the pitfalls of pretense. I would suggest a study of regional pockets of palpably avant-garde activity as an "alternative to the alternative" which could expand our sense of how humour figures as a self-regulating and self-examining trope across a variety of fringe, oppositional, or however-you-define-experimental moving image cultures, both past and present. One might very well start this study with Winnipeg, examining what bonds and separates the humour of such artists as Leslie Supnet, Darryl Nepinak, Karen and Jaimz Asmundson, Gwen Trutnau, Clint Enns, and Mike Maryniuk.

Another video that has provided me a mysteriously limitless amount of pleasure over the years is Jeanne C. Finley's 1987 tape *Accidental Confessions*. I first encountered this video while conducting a critical research internship on humour at Vtape in Toronto. Made under the auspices of the Bay Area Video Coalition, with an NEA grant, Finley's tape has a simple premise: colour footage of a demolition derby is combined with rolling text taken from real-life auto-insurance forms. As an opening text roll explains, these forms were filled out under the instruction that the signee summarize their accident *in the fewest words possible*. We cut to the demolition derby, and excerpts from these forms begin to crawl up from screen bottom. At the risk of spoiling some of the fun of watching the tape, the following is a small selection of the insurance texts presented, with line separations intact:

> AN INVISIBLE CAR
> CAME OUT OF
> NOWHERE, STRUCK
> MY CAR AND
> VANISHED.
>
> I WAS ON MY WAY TO

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[669] Gregory H. Williams, "Global Comedy: Humor, Irony, Biennials," *October* 160 (Spring 2017): 93.

THE DOCTOR WITH
REAR END TROUBLE
WHEN MY UNIVERSAL
JOINT GAVE WAY
CAUSING ME TO HAVE
AN ACCIDENT.

COMING HOME I DROVE
INTO THE WRONG HOUSE
AND COLLIDED WITH
A TREE I DON'T HAVE.

I WAS SURE THE OLD
FELLOW WOULD NEVER
MAKE IT TO THE OTHER
SIDE OF THE ROAD
WHEN I STRUCK HIM.

I take it there are a few reasons why, despite any humour apparent in the above text, the video's deployment of this text does not translate to the page. A relatively minor reason is that I have not duplicated here the video's blocky, sans-serif font; unless I am speaking for myself, there seem to be limits on how you can make a person laugh in Times New Roman. A more significant reason for a loss in translation is that I have not been able to imitate the video's rolling text, which reveals the insurance language line by line before coming to a halt in the centre of the screen. This produces, to my sensibilities, a near synesthetic effect whereby sense in the texts is felt to collapse, crunch, and get jammed as each sentence reaches its absurd collision point. I find it unsayably pleasing that this text-effect is laid atop footage of the banging, wheel-spinning brainlessness of the demolition derby. *Accidental Confessions* is my idea of a perfect work. I will leave to the reader's interest any further analysis of this video; trust that I have saved the funniest of the texts for future discovery.

There is precious little space left here to examine the relationship of Finley's video to her own time, to what came before her, and what came after. Interplays of text and image abound in

the history of avant-garde cinema; today, for example, there seems to be a growing trend among artists in the use of running text, placed near the bottom of the screen like subtitles spoken by no one. I have seen it work at least semi-humorously, as in videos by Jesse McLean. I do not claim to know what this portends. Has it anything to do with our text-obsessed communications with one another? As these texts become shorter, rushed out in bite sizes, do we feel ourselves pressured to become wittier? Will our communications soon crumple into the absurdities of Finley's insurance forms? How will the avant-garde ever deal with all this new material?

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