

The Changing of the Garde(s)

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The 1980s saw a fundamental shift in the interests, intentions, and accomplishments of North American avant-garde filmmakers. A significant number of younger film artists (whom I will call, for convenience's sake, the "Eighties Generation") contributed to a new avant-garde film discourse that differed significantly from the discourse produced by and designed for the avant-garde of the preceding decades (going back at least as far as Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* [1943]). To illuminate the nature and significance of this new discourse, I propose to draw upon Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and subsequent modifications of Bürger's theory by critics intent on applying Bürger's theoretical premises to specific movements in twentieth-century art and literature. Then, to bring theory to bear upon practice, I will compare some earlier and more recent avant-garde films that have formal elements, subject matter, or themes in common, but differ in ways that highlight the changes the Eighties Generation brought to the discourse of avant-garde film.

At the outset I want to insist that all avant-garde films are participants in, not simply objects of, or excuses for, a critical/theoretical discourse, no matter what the conscious intentions of the filmmaker might have been. At the same time, it is obvious that some films are more openly "discursive" than others (notable examples have come from the Lettrists and Situationists, as well as Fluxus and the structural/materialist film movements), and I think it is fair to say that the work of the Eighties Generation is notable for its engagement in a self-conscious, politicized discourse concerned with the cinematic apparatus (in its mechanical, perceptual, psychological, institutional, and ideological senses), as well as a broad range of other issues involving sex, gender, patriarchy, race, class, nation, neo-colonialism, globalization, corporate media, and the commodification of culture.

Leslie Thornton (whose on-going film cycle, *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, is one of the crowning achievements of the post-1980 avant-garde) could be speaking for most of her contemporaries in avant-garde filmmaking when she says, "I think if it's important now to have a critical perspective as a cultural producer, it's just as important to pursue forms of address that we call aesthetics. You can't just cut one off and say it's...questionable, bourgeois, corrupt or whatever. It all goes together, and the work that's going to last is art."¹ While an emphasis on art and aesthetics has been

part of the discourse surrounding avant-garde film for a long time, the same cannot be said of Thornton's identification of the artist as a "cultural producer" with "a critical perspective," or her reference to works of art as "forms of address." Such phrases reflect a recognition and acceptance of the artist's responsibility to engage in cultural debates, to exploit, in other words, the active, critical, even political, roles artists and their works of art play in contemporary culture—in the broadest sense of that term. Of course there are individual exceptions on both sides of the chronological/generational divide, and the new discourse did not reject everything upheld by the old one (as Thornton's affirmation of art and aesthetics indicates), but during the eighties it became increasingly apparent that a fundamental reorientation of theory and practice (what I have called elsewhere a "paradigm shift"²) was taking place within the ranks of younger avant-garde filmmakers and their supporters. The result was a new discourse composed of new films and new ways of thinking, talking, and writing about them.³

"The Avant-Garde is dead; long live the avant-garde."⁴

A defining moment in the development of the new discourse came with the publication of an Open Letter attacking the International Experimental Film Congress held in Toronto in the Spring of 1989. Signed by many (mostly American) members of the Eighties Generation, the letter charged that the Congress was dominated by the work of older filmmakers who may have been avant-garde at one time but did not seem so in the context of late twentieth-century social, political, and aesthetic concerns. Actually, the Toronto Congress was more open to new work than the Open Letter claimed, but it is also true that, with a few exceptions, the filmmakers invited to present workshops and appear on panels (e.g. Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, Pat O'Neil, Carolee Schneemann, Brigit Hein, Joyce Wieland, David Rimmer) were a generation older than most of the signers of the Open Letter. Moreover, the Congress opened with a Jack Chambers retrospective and closed with a Hollis Frampton retrospective, thus book-ending the week-long event with the work of two dead white males, as one critic of the Congress accurately, if insensitively, noted.⁵

While the Open Letter was only partially accurate in its charges against the Congress (it was written before the event took place and was based on advance announcements—and gossip—that circulated in the avant-garde film community), it expressed, in forceful terms, the frame of mind of the Eighties Generation. After declaring that the Congress is clearly intended to promote "the official history" of avant-garde film, it proclaims, "The time is long overdue to unwrite the Institutional Canon of Masterworks of the Avant-Garde. It is time to shift focus from the History of Film to

the position of film within the construction of history.” Complaining that the work to be shown at the Congress was “chosen to minimize linguistic, sexual, and cultural differences, typically to conform to the model of the ‘universal language of form’ so dear to Institutional esperantists,” the letter goes on to insist that there is, in reality, “a spirit of mind which continues to challenge the hegemony of industry, of government, of bureaucracy,” but that it is not represented by the Congress.

Significantly, the Open Letter does not attack particular films or filmmakers, but rather the critical agendas and institutional practices that perpetuate an avant-garde canon based on ahistorical values that privilege formal perfection and a presumed universality of meaning. In the view of the letter’s authors, truly avant-garde films are the result of an engagement with social and aesthetic issues grounded in the particular time and place of their making:

The revolutionary frame of mind pervading activity in film in the Teens and Twenties and again in the Fifties and Sixties—which seemed to die in the Seventies—continues to thrive, but *only* where it has shifted and migrated according to changing historical conditions. The issues which galvanized the Cinema Avant-Garde of earlier decades arose from different conditions than those which confront us today.⁶

Hence the letter’s defiant conclusion: “The Avant-Garde is dead; long live the avant-garde.”

To an unsympathetic observer, the Open Letter might seem to be little more than an outburst of Oedipal envy, the predictable consequence of a “generational rift,”⁷ or a petulant response of hurt egos (“How come we weren’t invited to the party?”), or simply another example of the pugnaciousness that has been endemic to the avant-garde since the Italian Futurists began issuing manifestoes and picking fights in the years prior to World War I. All of the above may be partially true, at least as far as the tone of the letter is concerned, but in its substance the letter reflects real and carefully considered issues that go beyond objections to the Congress *per se*. It addresses a larger critical bias that perpetuates “the Institutional Canon of Masterworks of the Avant-Garde” and consequently is unable to account for or appreciate newer, non-canonical works or engage constructively in the new avant-garde film discourse.

A prime example of this bias is Fred Camper’s essay, “The End of the Avant-Garde,” published in the *Millennium Film Journal* two years before the Congress took place. Much-discussed at the time (and a direct influence on the planning of the Toronto Congress⁸), the essay is best known for arguing fervently that the work of the younger generation of avant-

garde filmmakers does not measure up to the standards set by the older avant-garde “masters” (a position also taken by Jim Hoberman in a review of the Whitney Biennial published a few months earlier in the *Village Voice*⁹). But more illuminating for my present purpose are the criteria Camper proposes for evaluating a film’s worth:

...first of all a coherent cinematic expression in which each image has a reason for being where it is and a reason for following the previous image; its filmic form is connected to some kind of meaning, however untranslatable that meaning may seem: the work as a whole affects me strongly, ecstatically; it seems ambiguous and complete enough to offer, in its totality, not merely self-expression or a personality but also some sense of a whole lived life, an entire consciousness, a whole form of thinking, a different possibility for being.¹⁰

In his emphasis on formal rigour, on organic unity, on ambiguity, on powerful affect, and on art as an expression of “an entire consciousness,” Camper effectively summarizes the Romantic Modernism characteristic of the avant-garde film discourse that endorsed the canon of “masterworks” critiqued in the Open Letter. The most thorough and influential exposition of this discourse in scholarly-critical terms is P. Adam Sitney’s *Visionary Film*;¹¹ its fullest expression in personal-creative terms is the complete *oeuvre*—writings, lectures, films—of Stan Brakhage; its most concrete embodiment in public-institutional terms is the “Essential Cinema” collection of Anthology Film Archives.¹² But, of course, it is also a version of the larger Modernist project that dominated all the arts during much of the twentieth century. The key elements of this project are familiar but worth summarizing in order to highlight what is at stake in supplanting them with new ones.

First and foremost is the autonomy of art. Grounded philosophically in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* and aesthetically in nineteenth-century aestheticism and doctrines of *l’art pour l’art*, the concept of autonomy presumes that art should be absolutely distinct from the economic, social, political, and ethical dimensions of life, that it need not, indeed *should not*, be “relevant” or “engaged”; otherwise, it risks sinking to the level of mere propaganda. A corollary is that art is not only separate from, but superior to, popular, mass culture, and consequently offers an antidote to the culture industry’s alienating effect on society. Indicative of Modernist art’s distance from popular culture is a preponderance of new, “experimental” techniques employed by artists working in all art forms and media. These techniques are expected to serve the organic unity of the work as a whole and, at the same time, foreground the distinct, “essential”

properties of the medium in which the work is conceived. And while the work will undoubtedly reflect one or more aspects of modernity, it must also carry “universal” meaning drawn from “timeless” myths, symbols, and archetypes.

The artist is understood to be a creator of unique, original works expressing her or his special sensitivity (“a whole lived life, an entire consciousness,” in Camper’s terms): the more deeply felt and “personal” the work, the more “universal” it will be. Furthermore, the artist is “driven” to create by some ineffable force (rather than by the conscious decision to deal with social, economic, and political issues of the day), and is totally dedicated to the work—to perfecting the *art* of his or her art.

The audience for this art is expected to be knowledgeable, aesthetically sophisticated, skilled in interpretation, and open to the formal experimentation that makes Modernist works “difficult.” And, if not always affected “ecstatically” (like Camper), the audience should at least be capable of finding intellectual and emotional fulfilment through a serious and introspective engagement with the work of art. For all these reasons, such audiences are frequently called “elite.”

If, for the sake of brevity, I have produced something of a caricature of Modernist art, artists, and their audience, it is not to ridicule them (I recognize myself in that audience and have shared many of its assumptions about artists and their art). Rather, it is to indicate how they interlock and reinforce each other to produce the powerful set of premises about the nature and function of art that shaped avant-garde film discourse—in North America, at least—until the Eighties Generation came along. It helps to explain, on the one hand, the collective assumptions and evaluations that produced a canon of avant-garde “Masterworks” and, on the other hand, the critique of the canon in the Open Letter and in such assessments of American avant-garde film as Paul Arthur’s: “For nearly thirty years [*circa* 1950-1980] it was the unspoken desire of the American avant-garde to exist outside of history in an aesthetic preserve sealed by social and economic marginality, formal alterity to dominant cinema, and adherence to the self-validating criteria of Romantic consciousness.”¹³ If that “desire” was not as “unspoken” as Arthur claims (Jonas Mekas’ “Movie Journal” in the *Village Voice*, for instance, frequently expressed such desires), he is right in contending that it was firmly embedded in North American avant-garde film discourse until the 1980s.

At this point, it is useful to take a step back and view the conflicting discourses of avant-garde films in the larger context of theories of avant-garde art. By doing so, one can get beyond personal and generational allegiances and rivalries, individual critics’ preferences, the success or failure of individual filmmakers to satisfy those preferences, as well as ad hoc

definitions of “avant-garde,” “experimental,” “underground,” “alternative,” “fringe,” and other labels for films that fall outside the parameters of dominant, commercial cinema and conventional cinematic techniques. I have already begun to do this, in fact, by attempting to summarize the principal characteristics of Modernist aesthetics, some of which are rejected, while others are retained, in recent theories of the avant-garde.

Avant-Garde In Theory

In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger argues that a genuine avant-garde displays three fundamental features. The first is a rejection of the doctrine of artistic autonomy, in which, as Bürger puts it, “[Art] is conceived as a social realm that is set apart from the mean-ends rationality of daily bourgeois existence.”¹⁴ Autonomy, he says, may allow art to “criticize such an existence,” but renders it “functionless” because it can no longer be hoped that art will provoke change.¹⁵

The second feature, which is closely related to the first, takes the form of an attack on what Bürger calls “the institution of art.” Referring to Marcuse’s analysis of bourgeois culture in “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” Bürger writes, “[His] model provides the important theoretical insight that works of art are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works...in a given society or in certain strata or classes of a society.”¹⁶ Such “institutional frameworks and conditions” include museums and galleries, art dealers and buyers, the educational system (including art schools), scholarly, critical, and journalistic writing on art: the complete social, cultural, and economic apparatus that determines what is “art” and what is not, as well as where, how, and by whom art is made, supported, evaluated, distributed, and received.

The third feature is, in a sense, the “positive” result of the “negative” effects of undermining artistic autonomy and attacking the institution of art. It involves integrating—or re-integrating—art and life, which, ironically, requires jettisoning the category “work of art” altogether. Recognizing that this is “a profoundly contradictory endeavor” for the avant-garde, Bürger confirms that, “An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance [from it].”¹⁷ In fact, “When art and the praxis of life are one, when the praxis is aesthetic and art is practical, art’s purpose can no longer be discovered...”¹⁸ Consequently, “Instead of speaking of the avant-gardiste work, we will speak of avant-gardiste manifestation. A dadaist manifestation does not have work character but is nonetheless an authentic manifestation of the artistic avant-garde.”¹⁹ Citing such dadaist provocations as Duchamp’s “ready-mades,” Bürger writes, “But what is

involved in these manifestations is far more than the liquidation of the category 'work': it is the liquidation of art as an activity that is split off from the praxis of life that is intended."²⁰

Here is where Bürger's theory becomes most problematic. At a theoretical level, the "liquidation of art" implies also the liquidation of the avant-garde, since there would no longer be institutions of art or artistic autonomy to expose and subvert with avant-garde "manifestations." Art as a distinct contribution to culture and the avant-garde as a radical critique of art's cultural function—or what Bürger calls "the avant-garde as the self-criticism of art in bourgeois society"²¹—would perforce disappear. Moreover, at a concrete, historical level, Bürger's specific examples of avant-garde manifestations are limited to the "historical avant-garde," particularly Dadaism, and still more particularly Duchamp's "ready-mades." In fact, one sometimes feels that Bürger's theory rests precariously on one example of an avant-garde manifestation: the upside-down urinal entitled *Fountain* and signed by "R. Mutt," which Duchamp submitted to the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists (where it was rejected).

The problem, then, is how to make use of a theory of the avant-garde that seems relevant only to a small number of works produced during a limited period in the history of twentieth-century art, and that proposes a "sublation of art in the praxis of life"²² that not only spells the end of the avant-garde, but creates a situation in which, as Richard Wollin writes, "art degenerates to the status of merely a 'thing among things.'"²³ While Wollin is sympathetic to much of Bürger's argument, he is not willing to surrender the category of "work of art." Consequently, he objects to Bürger's privileging of Dadaist "ready-mades" and provocations because, he argues, their impact is ephemeral. For Wollin, avant-garde works should continue to be challenging and relevant beyond the immediate circumstances of their production and presentation to the public. Therefore, he proposes an avant-garde art that does not sacrifice all distinctions between art and life praxis, what he calls "de-aestheticized autonomous art." This is an art in which the avant-garde "self-consciously divests itself of the beautiful illusion, the aura of reconciliation, projected by art for art's sake, while at the same time refusing to overstep the boundaries of aesthetic autonomy..."²⁴ And for Wollin the best examples of avant-grade "de-aestheticized autonomous art" are to be found in the work of the Surrealists.

For Richard Murphy, who advances arguments similar to Wollin's, the best examples are offered by German Expressionism. The issue here is not whether Expressionism or Surrealism—or, for that matter, Dadaism, Futurism, Constructivism, or any other twentieth-century avant-garde

movement—is the most thoroughly avant-garde. Rather it is how Wollin and Murphy attempt to come to terms with the avant-garde’s “profoundly contradictory endeavor” to integrate art and life praxis. If a total integration of art and life *were* to take place, Murphy suggests, it would appear in one of two forms: “utopian” (elevating life to the status of art) or “cynical” (bringing art down to the level of everyday life—“to the status of merely a ‘thing among things,’” in Wollin’s formulation).

In the “utopian” alternative, artistic values like balance, harmony, proportion, and order would be translated into equivalent social relationships, such as equality, justice, tolerance, high-minded idealism, and orderly progress. This view, in fact, informed the earliest application of the military term “avant-garde” to the arts. Envisioning a union of socially and artistically progressive forces leading to a Socialist Utopia, the Saint-Simonian Olinde Rodriguez wrote in 1825 (in the persona of an artist in dialogue with a scientist and an industrialist), “We, the artists, will serve you as avant-garde. . . . We will see the result of our work when egoism, the bastard child of civilization, will have been pushed back to its last stronghold: when literature and the fine arts will have placed themselves at the head of the movement and will have finally roused society for its own good. . . .”²⁵ This ringing declaration continues to echo in Bürger’s more pessimistic assessment of the relationship of art to life: “All those needs that cannot be satisfied in every-day life, because the principle of competition pervades all spheres, can find a home in art, because art is removed from the praxis of life. Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are extruded from life as it were, and preserved in art.”²⁶

Were it not for “the principle of competition” (or in Rodriguez’s view, “egoism”), the sort of integration of art and life praxis Murphy labels “utopian” might—in theory—become a reality. That it has not come about is one reason for postulating an opposite possibility: the “cynical” union of art and life which, in Murphy’s view, would bring “art down to the banal level of reality, fragmenting artistic form, dismantling the syntax of poetic language and destroying any lingering sense of aesthetic harmony and organic structuring, so that the work of art. . . descends to the disjointed world of modernity.”²⁷ And of course in both the “cynical” and the “utopian” integration of art and life, art disappears, or at least loses all vestiges of autonomy, and the institutional contexts that sustain it disappear as well, which means that the avant-garde loses its *raison d’être*.

Murphy wants to salvage some of art’s autonomy by proposing an equivalent to Wollin’s “de-aestheticized autonomous art.” At the same time, he continues to regard the avant-garde text as an “oppositional discourse” that can bring about

what Marcuse calls a “revolution in perception.” In other words, it uses the cognitive power of art to defamiliarize a very specific set of institutional conventions: those modes of seeing that have been canonized by the power of the dominant social discourse and the pervasive institution of art. Thus, the program of de-aestheticization produces an art form whose central function involves questioning both the “affirmative” functions of traditional culture, and the inherent institutionally-conditioned ideological effects associated with it.²⁸

In the context of post-1980s avant-garde film, Murphy’s program for the avant-garde is succinctly summarized in a remark by Keith Sanborn (an outspoken member of the Eighties Generation and principal author of the Open Letter): “The politics of seeing is a more key issue than the art of vision.”²⁹

In other words, one way of understanding the accomplishments of the Eighties Generation is to place them in the context of theories that conceive of avant-garde art as an “oppositional discourse” designed to “defamiliarize...modes of seeing that have been canonized by the power of the dominant social discourse and the pervasive institution of art,” while at the same time maintaining a distinction between art and “the disjointed world of modernity.” This would be an art that, as Wollin puts it, “negate[s] the aura of affirmation characteristic of art for art’s sake while remaining consistent with the ‘modern’ requirement of aesthetic autonomy.”³⁰

This, it seems to me, is what Leslie Thornton is talking about when she links “a critical perspective as a cultural producer” with “forms of address that we call aesthetics.” The former leads to a rejection of the “aura of affirmation” and the artistic autonomy of art for art’s sake. The latter indicates an acceptance of “the ‘modern’ requirement of aesthetic autonomy” and the rejection of a “cynical” synthesis of art and life praxis. Thornton’s comment also implies a refusal to make absolute aesthetic distinctions between art and popular culture, art and mass media, art and life. It suggests a need to negotiate between these spheres in the production of works of avant-garde art. This, in turn, challenges assumptions about art as a privileged realm of timeless, universal truths—especially when such claims are made for avant-garde art. The Open Letter makes the same point in its reference to the avant-garde’s “revolutionary frame of mind,” which changes “according to changing historical conditions.” In the Eighties these conditions included feminism, lesbian and gay activism, multiculturalism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, the saturation of society by mass media, especially television, and—specifically for the filmmakers themselves—exposure to earlier avant-garde films.

Avant-Garde In Practice

For a brief, comparative study of the avant-garde's "revolutionary frame of mind" at work, I will begin with representations of childhood in Stan Brakhage's *Scenes From Under Childhood* (1967-1970) and Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (First Cycle, 1985-1996). Both works are composed of distinct parts completed and released over a span of several years and available for viewing individually or as a single, long film (135 minutes and 90 minutes respectively). Both take as their subject children's observations of, and interaction with, their immediate environment. But the similarities end there.

Scenes From Under Childhood is grounded in a deeply personal—partly recalled, partly intuited—sense of what is seen (hence the pun on "scenes") from before birth through the early years of childhood. Since seeing involves an extremely complex relationship between physiological, psychological, and proprioceptive responses to a visual realm that is both outside and inside the individual perceiver's processes of visual perception, Brakhage has developed a complex array of techniques to recreate a cinematic expression of those processes, many of which are incorporated in *Scenes From Under Childhood*: e.g., hand-held camera movement, intricate editing for rhythmic and graphic effects, frequent use of extreme close-ups, and variations in exposure and focus which transform edges, objects, and the spaces around them into amorphous shapes defined only by texture, colour, and movement. The resulting combination of "abstract" and "concrete" images creates a dense, multi-layered mise-en-scène for the child's exploration of a visual world that is both familiar and mysterious, inviting and forbidding, comforting and menacing. It is also a world enveloped in silence.³¹ The absence of a sound track not only invites the viewer to concentrate entirely on the visual aspects of the film, but implies that one of the most socializing of human faculties—verbal communication—is irrelevant to the aesthetic and epistemological goals of a film devoted to plumbing the depths of childhood experience.

In *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, on the other hand, sound—and especially the human voice—is not only a major structuring device, it is one of the things the film is *about*. This is announced early in *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* (1985) when found footage from a silent film depicting, in extreme slow motion, the vibration of a singer's vocal chords as they produce notes at different pitches (identified by intertitles that flash by in a frame or two) is accompanied on the sound track by demonstrations of the "preferred" pitch for the male and female speaking voice (taken from some sort of pseudo-scientific study). At various points in the film cycle, Peggy and Fred sing and talk, sometimes to each other, sometimes directly to the camera (at one point, Fred even criticizes Peggy for

talking “too fast”³²). Throughout the cycle of films, unidentified voices (from equally unidentified sources), as well as music and sound effects (mostly recycled from other sources), accompany, or intrude upon, the visual content—be it sequences of found footage or original footage of Peggy and Fred. Sound permeates the visual world of the film, and while it helps to shape the work at a formal, aesthetic level, it also imbricates the intimate, private worlds of Peggy and Fred in the larger world of media and social interaction—as do such details of characterization as Peggy’s rendition of Michael Jackson’s “Billy Jean” and Fred’s impersonation of a TV talk show host interviewing Amelia Earhart (played by an uncomprehending Peggy) and concluding the show with, “And folks, don’t, don’t, don’t forget Jack Nicholson.”

Nothing could be further from the silent, intensely visual world of *Scenes From Under Childhood*—or more illustrative of the differences in the cultural and aesthetic preoccupations of the two avant-garde film discourses embodied in these works. Thornton’s extensive use of found footage and found sound, as well as her allusions to, and incorporations of, popular culture imply that, no matter how unique they may seem, Peggy and Fred represent subjectivities shaped by social and cultural forces. While Thornton zeroes in on the mediating influence of society in general and mass media and verbal language in particular, Brakhage emphasizes, in his own words, “the *inner* world of foetal beginnings, the infant, the baby, the child”³³ (emphasis mine) in which womb, home, family, and unmediated visual experience define “childhood.” Moreover, in contrast to Brakhage’s distinctive shooting and editing techniques, Thornton’s integration of original and found footage plays down her own contribution as an artist. As Catherine Russell has observed, “Thornton’s combination of archival imagery with original footage tends to blur the edges between the two orders of representation, mainly because she has shot the scenes with the children in an off-centered, disinterested way, evoking the sense that is often created by found footage, of a lack of purpose.”³⁴ The art of Thornton’s work is, in part, its seeming *artlessness*—something that could never be said of Brakhage’s films—and it reflects an Eighties Generation emphasis on the artist as “cultural producer” with “a critical perspective.”

That emphasis is also reflected in the notable increase in found footage films during the eighties and after, but since some of the older, canonical filmmakers also made effective use of found footage, what distinguishes the earlier and later avant-garde film discourses is how the footage is used, what it is made to “say.” Moreover, as anyone familiar with the history of North American avant-garde film knows, the category of found footage films includes some important exceptions to the generalizations I

have been making about the older and newer avant-garde film discourses. It could be argued, for example, that Bruce Conner's *Report* (1963-1967), Arthur Lipsett's *A Trip Down Memory Lane* (1965), Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley's *Schmeerguntz* (1966), and a number of Stan Vanderbeek's found footage/collage films of the 1960s anticipate some aspects of the post-1980 discourse, while, conversely, Phil Solomon's found footage films since *The Magic Garden* (1986) might seem more at home in the company of "masterworks" by the previous generation of avant-garde filmmakers.

Despite some exceptions, however, the different discourses exemplified by *Scenes From Under Childhood* and *Peggy and Fred in Hell* can be found at work in many found footage films. Consider, for example, Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936) and Jerry Tartaglia's *Remembrance* (1990), both of which recycle images of glamorous Hollywood stars: Rose Hobart from *East of Borneo* (1931) and Bette Davis from *All About Eve* (1950), respectively. Accompanied by the same recording of Brazilian music repeated several times, Cornell's Hobart inhabits an exotic, violet-tinted, hermetically sealed world of dream-like changes in mise-en-scène, seemingly unmotivated action, and ambiguous expressions and gestures, while Tartaglia's Davis is subjected to a barrage of optical printer effects, to which are added some home movie footage and a sound track of opera arias, bits of other music, and Tartaglia's voice-over commentary on "grow[ing] up gay in America."

Cornell's techniques lift Hobart's image above its popular culture origins by enhancing its allure and placing it within the redeeming framework of Modernist art. Tartaglia keeps Davis' Margo Channing firmly fixed in the world of popular culture while, at the same time, turning her into a role model and icon of gay pride: "I pretend I am just like Margo: justifiably hostile, yet bitchy and eloquent. . . . The queen in me survives when Margo survives," Tartaglia announces on the sound track. Hobart's image exerts a kind of centripetal force that pulls the disparate elements of the film into a unified, organic whole and encourages a cult-like contemplation of the mysterious presence at its centre. Davis' image—while clearly fascinating for Tartaglia—functions more centrifugally (thanks to Tartaglia's playful manipulation of his found footage, his jumpy, nervous editing and self-reflexive voice-over), by directing our attention outward, toward issues of performance and reception, gender and identity, and the appreciation and appropriation of popular culture images ("I make my movies in order to undo the images which dominate my waking and dreaming life," Tartaglia says at the film's outset)—all notable elements of the Eighties Generation's "critical perspective" on individual development, social relationships, and cultural production.

Found footage also figures significantly in one of the last pair of films I will discuss here, but it functions differently and, arguably, more subversively than the footage of Bette Davis in *Remembrance*. The film in question is Peggy Ahwesh's *The Color of Love* (1994) which, like Carolee Schneeman's *Fuses* (1964-67), presents sexually explicit subject matter integrated with scratches, colours, and textures applied to the film's surface or embedded in its emulsion. Because of these similarities, the differences between the two films are all the more striking—and instructive.

Daringly candid for its time and notable for its emphasis on female sexuality, *Fuses* is an intimate, autobiographical account of sexual relations between Schneemann and her partner at the time, James Tenney. Yet, despite its direct, unembarrassed, and graphic depictions of male and female genitalia, cunnilingus and fellatio, foreplay and intercourse, the film is suffused with a romantic eroticism that not only celebrates—one might even say, essentializes—heterosexual lovemaking, but guarantees that the film will be received not as pornography but as a lyrical, subjective evocation of erotic experience rendered in visual language appropriate to avant-garde film.

To this end, Schneemann makes extensive use of chiaroscuro lighting, shoots with both hand-held and fixed cameras, and fragments the love-making into a montage of separate moments of passion and repose occasionally interrupted by other images—a black cat staring at the camera, Schneemann running on a beach, Tenney driving a car—that intrude upon the closed space of the lovers' bedroom. In addition to these characteristics of personal, poetic filmmaking, which she shares with Brakhage and a host of other avant-garde filmmakers of the period, Schneemann paints and scratches on the film itself (another technique employed by Brakhage, among others). The filmmaker's direct intervention in the imagery of her film produces several mutually reinforcing effects. It imparts a tactility to the physical strip of film, metaphorically linking emulsion and flesh, seeing and touching, the energetic play of light, colour and texture, and the sexual and psychological energy of lovemaking. At another level, and in keeping with the tenets of Modernism, it asserts the materiality of the medium and the "flatness" of the projected film image. It is also an indexical sign of the filmmaker's presence in the filmmaking process and an expression of the personal, artisanal relationship of the filmmaker to her film. Thus, in form as well as content, *Fuses* epitomizes the avant-garde film discourse of the sixties by expressing its maker's unique, personal vision through unconventional cinematic techniques. However, the film's explicit sexual imagery made *Fuses* extremely problematic for adherents of the burgeoning Feminist Movement of the sixties (it was rejected by the First International Festival of Women's Films), and

Schneemann's approach to her subject matter, as David James notes, implicitly places "the site of sexual performance...outside the historical and political conditions of women."³⁵

By contrast, Peggy Ahwesh places "the site of sexual performance" in *The Color of Love* inside those "historical and political conditions"—though in a way that some viewers might find more than a little perverse. She also continues what Manohla Dargis, writing before *The Color of Love* was made, called her "battle against what French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray calls 'phallic imperialism.'"³⁶ In Ahwesh's film, which was made from a decomposing super-8 film found in a dumpster, two women happily engage in various sexual activities with each other, but fail to arouse a man who seems to have passed out, or possibly is dead. He makes no response when one of the women cuts his chest, leg, and genitals with a knife or razor blade, nor when the women, with the man's blood smeared on their bodies, try to mount his flaccid penis. In the footage, as Ahwesh found it, some of the imagery was partially effaced by dirt, scratches and decomposing emulsion. The result is a kind of accidental censorship that often replaces explicit depictions of sex organs and sex acts with vibrant, abstract patterns of a complexity far-exceeding the hand-applied colours and textures of *Fuses*. Ahwesh enhanced these effects by re-framing, step-printing, and re-arranging some of the original footage. The result is as visually stunning as it is sexually transgressive, and it prompted one critic to write, "Through lurid poetics of film composition, the tawdry is transformed into the sublime."³⁷

"Sublime" may be an overstatement and "tawdry" an understatement, but the emphasis on transformation is correct. Ahwesh successfully avoids the pitfalls awaiting anyone who attempts, in Liz Kotz's words, "to reframe pornographic representations as objects of a politically motivated examination."³⁸ One way she transforms or reframes pornographic representations is by subverting conventional wisdom about mainstream pornography, as summed up by Christian Hansen, Catherine Needham and Bill Nichols:

Mainstream pornography represents a phallocentric order symbolized by male desire and a universal masculinist order, naturalized as a given. The phallus stands in for sexuality and power. . . . The phallus provides an index or standard of power and authority. The penis as phallus—symbol of sexual potency—is the "true star," celebrated in countless close-ups.³⁹

While clearly inadequate as a description of the footage Ahwesh appropriated for *The Color of Love*, such generalizations remind us that mainstream—i.e. heterosexual—pornography is always expected to "star" the

phallus; hence the subversiveness of Ahwesh's choice of found footage in which the erect phallus is notably absent, and the supine, inert male is little more than a prop in the women's vigorous lovemaking (much of which occurs while one or the other woman straddles his body). Their vaginas become the "true stars" of the film's close-ups. (In this regard, it could be said that penis and vagina "co-star" in *Fuses*.)

Another kind of reframing of pornography results from the original film's deterioration. By frequently obscuring part or all of the actors and their interactions, it works against the kind of clear and unambiguous representation of sexual organs and sexual acts that producers of pornography strive for and consumers of pornography expect. And more interestingly, the textures and colours produced by the passage of time and the unstable chemistry of film emulsion complement and expand upon the film's substitution of the vagina and female sexuality for the phallus and male sexuality. As the densely textured, brilliantly coloured, fluid, fluctuating patterns of decay flow in and out of the frame, they become tropes for the intricately layered tissues of the vagina, and, as they expand and contract, they literally reframe the *mise-en-scène* and action. Assisted by Ahwesh's step-printing (and an Astor Piazzolla tango on the sound track), they endow the film with rhythms, shapes, and textures that are the antithesis of the rigid, erect, penetrating, and ejaculating penis-phallus of mainstream pornography. It is almost as if, in a metamorphosis more bizarre than anything David Cronenberg has concocted, the actual, physical strip of film is turning into a vagina.

This is where art and critique most effectively join forces in Ahwesh's film—and where my comparison of *The Color of Love* and *Fuses* as exemplary of their respective avant-garde film discourses comes to rest. For, just as Ahwesh's images come from anonymous found footage—not, as in *Fuses*, from the filmmaker's own camera aimed at her own and her lover's bodies—so the "added" textures and colours in *The Color of Love* are the result of processes in which the filmmaker had no hand (except to emphasize them through optical printing)—not, as in *Fuses*, where they derive from the filmmaker's handmade marks on the film. Although Schneemann bravely opened a space in North American avant-garde film for explicit (hetero)sexual representations, her techniques placed her so close to—indeed, literally inside of—her film, that there is no room for the kind of "critical perspective on cultural production" that Ahwesh achieves by keeping some distance between herself and her film. From her perspective she can address a range of topics of interest to the Eighties Generation: from pornography, phallocentrism, and lesbianism ("a lesbian vampire film" is one of Ahwesh's labels for the film⁴⁰), to revisionist challenges to theories of "visual pleasure," the "male gaze," and fixed,

gender-specific signifiers of desire in visual representations of sexuality.

Although *Fuses* does not critically address such issues (to expect it to do so would be unrealistic—indeed, anachronistic), there is no doubt that it reflects “the revolutionary frame of mind” the authors of the Open Letter recognized in avant-garde film of the fifties and sixties. But, as historical conditions change, what is revolutionary—or truly avant-garde—necessarily changes too. To fail to recognize that necessity is to relegate avant-garde film to the safe confines of the cinematic institution of art (and its canon-making apparatus), where it may continue to satisfy aesthetically, but loses its oppositional thrust and contemporary relevance: it becomes avant-garde in name only. So far, the Eighties Generation seems to have avoided that fate.

Notes

1 William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), 99.

2 Wees, “Carrying On: Leslie Thornton, Su Friedrich, Abigail Child and American Avant-Garde Film of the Eighties,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d’études cinématographiques* 10, no. 1 (2001): 70-95, 70.

3 A notable early example of the new discourse was a series of screenings in the Netherlands during the fall of 1990, and the subsequent publication of *A Passage Illuminated: The American Avant-Garde Film 1980-1990* (Amsterdam: Foundation Mecano, 1991) with insightful essays on the younger generation of filmmakers by Paul Arthur, Manohla Dargis, and Tom Gunning (who also discusses some of the films the “old masters”—Gunning’s term—made during the 1980s).

4 “Open Letter to the Experimental Film Congress” [May 1989]; with seventy-six signatures, the Open Letter was distributed shortly before the International Experimental Film Congress opened in Toronto on 28 May 1989. It has been reprinted, along with several other documents related to the Congress, in William C. Wees, “‘Let’s Set the Record Straight’: The International Experimental Film Congress Toronto 1989,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d’études cinématographiques* 9, no. 1 (2000): 101-116.

5 Manohla Dargis, “The Brood,” *Village Voice*, 20 June 1989, 92.

6 Wees, “Let’s Set the Record Straight,” 103-104.

7 Dargis, 92.

8 Camper’s influence on the Congress organizers is explained at some length in the introduction to the Congress catalogue reprinted in Wees, “Let’s Set the Record Straight,” 109-111.

9 J. Hoberman, “Fear and Trembling at the Whitney Biennial,” *Vulgar Modernism: Writing on Movies and Other Media* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 173-184; originally published in the *Village Voice*, 18 June 1987.

10 Fred Camper, “The End of Avant-Garde Film,” *Millennium Film Journal* 16-18 (1986-87): 99-124, 99-100.

11 P. Adam Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

12 Its last institutional bastion might have been the Toronto Congress, but the “Views From the Avant-Garde” screenings curated by Mark McElhatten and Gavin Smith for the New York Film Festival since 1997 show that it still has its champions and an appreciative audience.

13 Paul Arthur, “Lost and Found: American Avant-Garde Film in the Eighties,” *A Passage Illuminated*, 15-29, 18.

14 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 10.

- 15 Bürger, 11.
- 16 Bürger, 12.
- 17 Bürger, 50.
- 18 Bürger, 51.
- 19 Bürger, 50.
- 20 Bürger, 56.
- 21 Bürger, 20.
- 22 Bürger, 51.
- 23 Richard Wollin, "Modernism vs. Postmodernism," *Telos* 62 (1984-85): 9-29, 16.
- 24 Wollin, 16.
- 25 Nicos Hadjinicolaou, "On the Ideology of Avant-Gardism," *Praxis* 6 (1981): 38-70, 41.
- 26 Bürger, 50.
- 27 Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.
- 28 Murphy, 40.
- 29 Wees, *Recycled Images*, 91. Although speaking generally, Sanborn is also alluding directly to Stan Brakhage's magnum opus, *The Art of Vision* (1961-65).
- 30 Wollin, 16.
- 31 Brakhage first released Part I of *Scenes From Under Childhood* with a soundtrack, but subsequently replaced it with a silent version.
- 32 This sequence reappears in Thornton's recent film, *Have a Nice Day Alone* (2001).
- 33 Stan Brakhage, *Canyon Cinema Film/Video Catalog* (San Francisco: Canyon Cinema, 2000), 61.
- 34 Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 244.
- 35 David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 321.
- 36 Manohla Dargis, "Beyond Brakhage: Avant-Garde Film and Feminism," *A Passage Illuminated*.
- 37 Gavin Smith, "The Way of All Flesh," *Film Comment* 31, no. 4 (1995): 18.
- 38 Liz Kotz, "Complicity: Women Artists Investigating Masculinity," *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography and Power*, eds. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 101-123, 107.
- 39 Christian Hansen, Catherine Needham, and Bill Nichols, "Pornography, Ethnography, and the Discourse of Power," ed. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 201-228, 211-212.
- 40 Peggy Ahwesh, email to author, 15 May 2001.