

HOLLYWOOD, HOLLYWOOD

We who were living are now dying
With a little patience

T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*

In remembrance, we are now one with Walter Benjamin in his insight that this is an age of the aestheticization of politics. The moment of the beautiful, of the classical proportions of symphonic coordination, has been torn from its roots in the history of human anguish, of the despair of the dispirited mind. The aesthetic impulse has been given over to the celebration of the collectivity, of administered existence, of the vain ministrations of the process of instrumental rationality. Today, in this twilight of human domination, the project of coordinating the heterogeneous field of human experience around an enduring and prophetic image of the beautiful has been reduced for its fulfillment to the production of mimetic images of the public situation, to the marshalling of social existence into the inferno of politics itself. The aesthetic experience has merged with the imperatives of political existence; and the result is a profound and terrible confusion of the externalizations and spatializations of the modern with the singularity, the sublimity, of the beautiful itself. Aesthetics, as a human vocation, as a social necessity of the good human life, is in retreat from the dark impulses — moral terror, indeterminacy, duration — the existence of which bestirred the beginnings of the movement of modern times. Now, politics are one with beauty to the extent that the primitive existential terror of human existence has been overcome, has been subjected to a great forgetting, in the rush to form, to method, to Enlightenment.

In the theoretical analysis of the public domain, it is often unrecognized that fundamental transformations in the object of analysis, in this instance in the sphere of socio-cultural experience, require corresponding changes in the method, the style, of interrogation. What method of interrogation, of exposition, is appropriate to the deciphering of aestheticized politics, to the understanding of a society in which the moment of the beautiful is entangled with the actuality of the *horror* in a prolonged dialectic of madness?

It is apparent that the unification of aesthetics and politics, of image and will, has transformed the *oeuvre* of the film into a significant interrogatory of human existence. The film, this codification of the *masque*, this unveiling of

CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS

the *ratio* of the internally related imagery of illusion, has a twofold significance. First, the film conforms in the logic of its construction to the aesthetic laws of motion of presentation, of exhibition, of the object of society. Social existence now is experienced, and experienced directly, as an enigmatic ensemble of coordinated images of the public situation. The image has been made flesh; and the flesh is the social body of society itself. The aestheticization of politics, of collective purpose, is coeval with the organization of life, public and private, around the exclusive prerogatives of a political economy of sight. The art of illusion, the visual sleight of hand, the "unreal city" of manipulated images of the social situation, has escaped its origins in the specialized *techné* of film; taking up a new and more absolutist place of operation in the sphere of administered culture itself. The *logos* of the social image, the rationalization of illusion, reflects the actual structure of a society which conforms increasingly to the abstract and general mediation of the flight of Capital, from political economy, from bureaucracy. The aestheticization of politics transforms the currency of the image into the apogee of human desiring. Capital is the emblematic expression of desire; and the sphere of the imaginary is a main feeding-ground of Capital, of commodification. The film, this refraction of all social relations, this celebration of the moving illusion, this technification of imagery, mimics in the flesh, in the actuality of its methods of operation, the general social logic of society as a whole. The film, this marvellous contrivance of artifice, exists now as the *idée* of the social body; in a grand irony, in a curious mutation of the dialectic of the illusory and the real, the aesthetic moment of the film has been generalized into the social logic of the public realm. The *oeuvre* of the film serves now as the nuclear phase, the celebrant and the critic, of the theatre of high desire, of the society of the spatialization of politics.

To the extent that the *form* of the film parallels the depth surrealism of actual experience, then the *content* of the film is also transformed into a main cultural interrogatory of society. An analysis of the architecture of the film, of the space and timing of the characterization of sight and sound, provides a glimpse into the workings of the structure of the social process. Aesthetic form re-presents the forms of social logic; the archeology of the moving image of the film suggests the movement itself of social imagery made real. For example, Bertolucci's visual epic, *1900*, is, in part, an eloquent reconstruction in the silence of form of the mirthless realism, the historical stolidity, of the Communist Party of Italy. The imaginative architecture of *1900*, its inflated historical scale and methodical pace, reflect the death of ontology, of the philosophical imagination, in the ideological enterprise. Equally, Wender's *As American Friend* reconstitutes in the very *form* of the film — the juxtapositioning of death and locomotion, of stories of fraud and fealty, of the sudden, unexpected return of the dead — the apprehension, the fear of the unpredictabil-

HOLLYWOOD, HOLLYWOOD

ity of the known, which is at the heart of the heart of modern times. The film anticipates in form, in the rationality of visual connections, the disconnections and continuities of the social object. And, more so in content, the film captures the ambiguity of chaos and absurdity, the carnival of sights and sounds, the moment of the frivolous and the melancholy, which qualify and mediate human relations in the realm of the socio-cultural. The film is a vital mosaic, a totalizing codification, of social experience; and its codifications, like the totalities of administered existence, are enigmatic in their grouping together of the profound and the degraded, of the mad and the superficial, of the apologetic and the critical. The film, as an instance of cultural interrogation, contains the usual range of commodified expressions; and each expression, irrespective of the quality of its interrogation, is also a reflection of, and inquiry into, different dimensions of the social object. Independent of human intentions, the film has become an important aspect of the cultural construction of reality.

II

The search for a new method of cultural interpretation, for the critical translation of film appreciation into social self-reflection, is made all the more urgent by the present demoralization and deep confusion of society. Roland Barthes reminds us in his brilliant text, *A Lover's Discourse*, that sometimes the victims of trauma have to be reminded gently that the epochal event of psychological shock has already occurred; that the *horror* which is so feared as to induce the immobility of moral depression is in our collective past, not in our future. The situation of social trauma, of existing without memory in the cell of the dominion of totalitarian reality, is the fate of the inhabitants of this, the wasteland of our dreams. Today, the commodity form, once historically anchored within the boundaries of materialism, has broken beyond the frontiers of political economy, taking up residence in the domain of culture. The bourgeois individual, suffering under the double sign of labour and myth, takes up the hapless quest of Odysseus; but this time unlike the *Odyssey*, without guidance, lost in a world which has in its past the abandonment of tradition and, in its future, the arbitrary course of a culture which veers between the polarities of nihilism and narcissism.

Sartre was wrong. This is not the age of Marx, of History. It is the morrow of Nietzsche, of bad conscience as normal reason, of the tragic sense of modern life, of eternal recurrence as happy burlesque. The crisis of modernity has transcended the myth of political economy. Increasingly, the secret of Enlightenment — the desacralization of moral terror and the enchantment of the "iron cage" of the society — is revealed in the ambiguous text of cultural experience. Ours is a society in which the fateful saga of the integration of

CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS

labour, domination, and myth is played out in the crisis-like atmosphere of the mediation of individual and market-place; in the troubled circumstances, that is, of desiring after desire itself.

Now, with the sounds of economic and social turbulence in the air, the possibility suggests itself that a fateful sea-change has taken place in the culture of North America; that something indispensable to the well-being of the life of reason has been lost; that somehow, the items of cultural experience have passed beyond the frontiers of rationality, into the region of madness. Following the text of *Altamont*, we note the urgency with which demobbed spectators put paid to their claim, their social right, for a moment of celebrity. They seize the stage. *Phantasm* goes public; and the people of Sade, the survivors of the end of Enlightenment, of Vietnam, corrode the will, the social contract, of the institutions of the age of Weber. In the culture of North America, the audience yearns to be one with celebrity; and celebrity itself is only a sign in negativity of the presence of the stage. Cast away into the turbulence, into the trauma, of the market-place of high desire, the bourgeois 'I' surrenders. The solitary ego is vacated; it ruptures onto the public scene. The ego, the 'I', the bourgeois self, fuses with the mob, the publicized id. The laws of motion of public action, the high adventures of the market-place, are now interiorized. In the midst of the mob culture of North America, there remains in exile the self-reflective capacity of the bourgeois self. And is it not ironic that, today, privacy is possible only in publicity?

It is in the midst of the crisis of culture that we turn to the interrogation of film as one possibility for the recovery, the radical recovery, of the possibility of self-interpretation, of social autocritique. This project begins with the theoretical proposition that the critical analysis of film, both in the archeology of its formal properties and in the political economy of its content, will yield an original understanding of the ambiguity and chaos that is central to the text of contemporary culture. Interpretation of the form of the film approximates, and anticipates, an investigation of the formal logic, the architecture of imagery, of the process of cultural experience. And, analysis of the content of the film, is a precise methodology for a depth understanding of the symbolism, the social mediations, of the public realm. The content of the film is an intensive orchestration, an experimental working-through, of possibilities suggested by the process of human action itself.

Arthur Kroker
