THE WORK OF FILM IN THE AGE OF TV/VIDEO PRODUCTION

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Part of the problem that television seems to pose for film studies is that it is always both aesthetically and ideologically problematic. The specificity of television is at once technological and economic. The video image is fundamentally different from the cinematic one, but so is its dissemination and reception. The difference between television and video, or between broadcast TV and its medium of expression, is a difference that makes claims on two spheres of study — the political and the aesthetic.

The dominant approach taken by film scholars has emphasized the political or socio-cultural dimension of television. Summed up in an AFI anthology entitled *Regarding Television*[1], film scholarship has rallied around a prospective "theory of television."[2] But such a theory, utilizing the tools of analysis developed in cinema studies, can only be as thorough, useful and extensive as the texts that it takes as its object. In *Regarding Television* these range from soap opera to sports. The one essay included on video art (by Maureen Turim) doesn't mention a single work. While one can engage with broadcast TV at any given point, the absence of a canon of video art seems to be prohibitive of serious discussion. Thus, of the two spheres of investigation, the political tends to take precedence over the aesthetic in the study of the "other" medium, television.

Any discussion of the aesthetics and politics of contemporary media and art is indebted to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. A common criticism of T.W. Adorno's aesthetics is that his exclusive category of autonomous art constitutes a reductive elitism. But one is not necessarily subscribing to an "elitist theory" when one differentiates autonomous art from what the Frankfurt school called "the culture industry." It is not always an easy distinction to make, nor a necessary one.[3] However, it was a central point of contention in an important debate between Adorno and Walter Benjamin, recently published in *Aesthetics and Politics.*[4]

In his seminal essay of 1935, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin's purpose was to explain how the new photographic technology demanded a new conception of art, and to indicate the potential politicization of art (especially film) as an instrument of the left. The omnipresence of television today as the dominant mode of mechanical (or now, electronic) reproduction necessitates some revision of Benjamin's prognosis, but several of his categories or motifs remain valuable parameters for discussion of contemporary media. His essay can, in fact, be read as a preliminary theory of video.

Most importantly, Benjamin's thesis that "That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art,"[5] is largely confirmed with television. "Aura" for Benjamin refers to the material history embodied in an object:

> The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissable from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced... and what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.[6]

The locus of authority in television is problematic: on the one hand the role of "author" is eliminated, or at least very cleverly disguised, and on the other hand, certain aspects of television, such as TV news, are couched in an unambiguous authoritative voice.

Benjamin's optimistic conception of technological art also involved what he called its component of "shock". For Benjamin, this was simply the experience of discontinuity, of disparity and fragmentation that characterize modern industrial life. Its almost Brechtian manifestation in film was the potential of montage to "put the public in the position of the critic," through an increase of distraction over contemplation.[7] Distraction has lost a good deal of the political potential that Benjamin ascribed to it, and yet video imagery, through the pulsations of light emmission and its heavy reliance on close-ups, is characterized by discontinuity and

fragmentation. Again, it is as if Benjamin was anticipating television in his theorization of a cinema that never existed.

Thirdly, Benjamin lamented the disappearance of storytelling in our century, a form of narration that has paradoxically reemerged with television.[8] Storytelling differs from both novel and information in that it is thoroughly embedded in the life of the storyteller, so that the narrative extends beyond the arbitrary limits of its telling. Television is largely experienced as a "flow",[9] insofar as it has so many beginnings and endings that there is often no actual beginning or end. The integration of commercials and the smooth transition between programmes constitute an ongoing narrative into which the viewer inserts him or herself. The storyteller in this case can be understood as the entire corporate industrial structure of broadcast TV; the "life experience" that is passed on is the cumulative and repetitive range of cultural norms and values.

These concepts of aura, shock and storytelling are important components of an aesthetic of reception. By putting as much weight on the act of communication as on representation, Benjamin rethought art as media in the sense of mediation. If we return to the Adorno/Benjamin debate alluded to above, the limitations of this application of an aesthetic of reception should become clear. In a letter to Benjamin dated 18 March 1936, Adorno detailed his reservations about "The Work of Art":

> ... what I would postulate is *more* dialectics. On the one hand, dialectical penetration of the "autonomous' work of art which is transcended by its own technology into a planned work; on the other, an even stronger dialectization of utilitarian art in its negativity,... You under-estimate the technicality of autonomous art and over-estimate that of dependent art.[10]

Film theorists who have recently turned their attention to television have made valuable progress towards the latter dimension of Adorno's directive, subjecting the "culture industry" to intensive critical analysis. I would like to indicate here the ways in which the "autonomous work of art" has been "dialectically penetrated" with a view towards a transcendence "by its own technology." That is, while film theorists have been attending to television and producing valuable results, filmmakers have also been attending to video with equally important achievements. Of course the work of video artists shouldn't be underestimated, and the following analyses are not meant to replace consideration of video art, but to indicate another mode of discourse on and in the medium.

The filmmaker who has dealt most extensively with the relationship between film and video is Jean-Luc Godard. Since his involvement in TV and his incorporation of it in his films is both complex and diverse, it would require a separate discussion to deal adequately with it. Much of

his television work, as well as his 1975 film Numero Deux, consists of commentaries on the film-video dialogue that are far more illuminating and perceptive than anything possible on paper. Godard's influence on other filmmakers, including Wim Wenders, Yvonne Rainer and Chantal Ackerman, has been tremendous, and the work of these three people is perhaps representative of the scope of the film-video dialogization.

Video is extensively represented in most of Wim Wenders' films, usually with unambiguous negative connotations. In *Room 666* (1982) this antagonism is most explicit. Sixteen filmmakers attempt to answer the so-called question: "The cinema is a language about to get lost, an art about to die?" in a hotel room with a television set behind their left shoulders. The TV is not always on, and different interviewees cope with it in different ways. Godard himself changes the channel to watch a tennis match; other directors' addresses are completely upstaged by the highly visual imagery (movement and colour) behind them; others turn off the TV, etc.

With the exception of Godard, most of the directors seem to agree that auteurism is on the wane, and that this is unfortunate. Many causes are mentioned, including Speilberg's labour problems, but the recurring theme is TV, especially home video. The role of the TV set in *Room 666* indicates the source of the Satanic threat. The representation of video in some of Wender's other films indicates just what this threat consists of.

In both *The American Friend* (1975) and *The State of Things* (1981), death is witnessed by video cameras without human connections. In the first film a bank of surveillance monitors do not interfere with or prevent Jonathan (Bruno Ganz) from murdering a man in the subway station that they "survey"; they simply represent the event simultaneously, whether or not anyone is watching. The last shot of *The State of Things* is the video picture captured by Fritz's camera after he is shot. Again, it is instantaneous and disembodied. These are the features of video that most effectively dissolve "aura" as Benjamin conceived it. Video in the form of portapaks and surveillance devices pretty well eliminates "the distinction between author and public," another feature of aura.[11]

The unconscious dehumanized qualities of TV that Wenders emphasizes come to the fore in *Lightning Over Water* (1980). The narrative of this film is structured by Nick Ray's actual death from cancer, and both Farrell and Wenders play themselves, emphasizing their 'surrogate son' relationships with Ray. Farrell wields a video camera and Wenders directs a film crew. Farrell's footage is featured intermittently throughout the film, sometimes blown up to screen size and sometimes on monitors, and it shows mainly Ray's talking head as well as some shaky verité-style sequences.

Wenders' relationship with Farrell is never made explicit, but his status as a filmmaker and Farrell's as a videographer stand in the film as an expression of sibling rivalry. But it is a metaphor that goes both ways, as their relationship colours their different mediums in the same way as Wenders' "anxious" relationship with Ray has its source in Bloomian aesthetics. Ray is his auteur father only insofar as Wenders admires — and presumes to imitate — his filmmaking style. Likewise, Farrell is a threatening, competitive brother only in his choice of an alternative medium. In short, it is a film in which professional/artistic relationships are cast as familial ones.

In *Sauve qui peut*, Godard drew an analogy between the film/video relationship and the Cain/Abel relationship, and in *Lightning Over Water*, Wenders seems to be taking him seriously. Video is constantly posited as a subsidiairy discourse to film, lacking both its scope and its responsibility. The danger, for Wenders, of the dissolution of aura is the corresponding de-emphasis of auteurism as authority. Furthermore, insofar as the incorporation of video images of Ray's deteriorating body sets up a graphic display of temporal discontinuity, juxtaposing the stages of this death in a single image, Wenders also exploits the "shock" effect of technological reproduction through his use of video. And Farrell's video discourse, especially as compared to Wenders' larger, controlling cinematic one, is very much a form of storytelling. Its continuous unstructured quality, lack of extravagant technology, and Farrell's ability to shoot everywhere all the time at close range gives his discourse an intimacy unavailable to Wenders' authoritative structuring of Nick Ray's demise.

Yvonne Rainer's film *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985) is about discourse itself. One strand of the many conflicting voices and languages is shot in video. It is used to cover a debate that Rainer, as a New York City resident, was involved in; a debate between artists, immigrants, developers and politicians over New York City housing. The various speeches made by representatives of the different groups are scattered through the rest of the "enacted" material of the film, which exibits, on the whole, high production values. The video sections create a contrast of textures as well as a variety of levels of "realism".[12]

Traditionally, black-and-white stock and verité camera-style have connoted "realism" in cinema, and blown-up video tends to take over this role to a large extent. But unlike, say, the "documentary" sequence of *Citizen Kane*, which functions as a comparitively objective and distanced discourse, in *The Man Who Envied Women*, the video-taped sections are relatively subjective and intimate. The issues raised in the video portions concern the events and experiences of people's lives. Compared to the abstracted theoretical debates between

post-structuralism and political analysis, Freud and Marx, feminism and capitalism, that dominate Rainer's film, the housing issues and their video-taped representation constitute an "everyday language."

Like Farrell's discourse in *Lightning Over Water*, the difference that the video image makes is one of relative banality. Immediacy, spontaneity and even an "ideology of liveness,"[13] as well as certain formal properties — low definition image, light emission, etc. — are used for specific political and aesthetic ends in these films. Whether one calls this discourse "de-auratized," "everyday language," storytelling, or "more real", its incorporation into film constitutes what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a dialogical relationship of discourses, or "heteroglossia."

A crucial feature of Bakhtin's model of double-voiced discourse is that the new language belongs to "another" — some person or group whose world-view the traditional dominant discourse cannot accomodate. The dialogic effect is double-edged. When a new speech and its attendant style and politics are incorporated into the author's (in the cinema we might call this the 'filmmaker's' or even the 'production's') text,

> any direct work and especially that of the dominant discourse is reflected as something more or less bounded, typical and characteristic of a particular era, aging, dying, ripe for change and renewal.[14]

On the other hand, the alien, appropriated language(s) are potentially "qualified and 'externalized', show as something historically relative, delimited and incomplete... they, so to speak, criticize themselves."[15]

Thus, in *Lightning Over Water* the tension between Wenders and Farrell and their respective media is a dramatic expression of the question posed in more explicit terms in *Room 666*. Rainer, on the other hand, escapes the threat that video poses to Wenders simply by setting different stakes, replacing his artistic ego with a question of realism.

A third film that dialogizes film and video is Chantal Ackerman's *Les Annees 80* (1983; released in English as *The Golden Eighties*.) The first half of this 85-minute film is shot entirely in video and blown up to the film size, resulting in a textured image of constant light movement in which the outlines of figures are slightly blurred. The few long shots and medium shots are noticeably less distinct than the dominating close-ups, and camera movement is minimal. This section of the film consist of auditions and rehearsals of individual actresses and actors for the musical that we see directly on film in the second half. Part One is not *the* film, but an assortment of performances by individuals, some of whom will be cut from the *real* film, Part Two. And yet they are performances, directed, edited and organized by Ackerman, who actually appears in the film in

these capacities. The first part concludes with Ackerman herself singing very badly in rehearsal.

The final production in the second half of *Les Annees 80* is more like a bad dream than a musical. It is distinguished from Part One by virtue of its narrative, group performances and image quality, but it is equally decentered. The singing and dancing are meaningless cultural forms. Compared to the individual struggles of performers in the first half to "get it right," to become someone else, to express things that "don't come easily," and to embarrass themselves, the ensuing musical is superficial trash. Ackerman uses the "everyday" quality of television and the "special" character of film to explode the mythologies of both media; the intensity and depth of the former is opposed to the superficiality of the latter. Through the banality of the video medium the banality of cinema is revealed. Bakhtin explains why *skaz*, which is "not a specific style but only a socially or individually defined manner of storytelling," is necessary in certain historical periods: "When there is no adequate form for an unmediated expression of an author's intentions, it becomes necessary to refract them through another's speech."[16] In the three films discussed above, television is incorporated as a medium of expression that contains within its very form the politics and aesthetics of our experience of the medium. Because it is channelled into our home everyday, television is far closer to an "oral tradition," an accessible, familiar discourse than is its older sibling, the cinema. The video voice is one that can be and is ignored as much as it demands and receives attention.

The evolution of art and literature has always involved dialogization and incorporation of popular or less sophisticated forms. But in the video/film dialogue, the blown-up video imagery has an unusually significant scope, primarily because it raises the question of media rather than art. The two media are differentiated economically and experientially; we have different physical and cultural relationships with film and television. Stripped of the contents of television, the video image is still a sign of television; blown up, the low-definition of the video image is exaggerated, so that whatever is represented through video in film is represented at two removes. It is a reflexive device that can be made to double back on itself, introducing an image that is inaccessible to film, but paradoxically doing so in a film, on film.

The difference between video and TV, a difference which pertains mainly to reception — viewing conditions and expectations — can be misleading. The implicit assumption in Bakhtin's model of heteroglossia is that we cannot dissociate the purely formal elements of a discourse from our previous experience of it — from its prior manifestations outside the text. What the filmmakers discussed above have privileged in

the commercial experience of TV is its familiarity or ordinariness. It isn't that everyone makes video every day, but we all participate in it daily. Compared to film, it does lack aura, and it is precisely this secularized accessibility that speaks when video imagery is incorporated into cinema.

This cinematic heteroglossia does of course have a radical potential. If the "logic of late capitalism" is indeed an indifferent monolothic identity in which oppositional strategies consist of restoring the value of difference and pluralism,[17] there is perhaps some value in the hybridization of discourses for their own sake. The introduction of a video discourse into film has proved to be an essential means for filmmakers such as Wenders, Rainer and Ackerman to represent themselves, their audiences and/or their society, as decentered and differentiated. Other filmmakers who have worked with such a dialogization of film and video include Orson Welles, Nicholas Roeg, George Landow and, of course, Godard.

It is the use of the concept of authorship and its attendant spheres of hierarchy within the work, from authority to aura, as an indirect allegory of society as a single dominating, standardized system, and their mutual eradication, that constitutes radical art today. Chantal Ackerman's work in particular stands out as evidence that such a project is not impossible. Video and TV can provide the filmmaker with aesthetic strategies for a deconstruction of cinematic power structures: auteurism, voice-over, direction, etc. The value of television for filmmakers is its status as medium, as not-art, and as a form of mediation that originates between us and the world in our own homes.

Likewise, the value of the work of these filmmakers is their dialectical approach to media, the aesthetic and political nature of which we are, quite correctly, concerned about. Art, as Adorno points out, is inherently technological, and artists working outside the "culture industry" do indeed penetrate the technics of production in the society of which they are nevertheless a part. Adorno also wrote that,

> ... the principle that governs autonomous works of art is not the totality of their effects but their own inherent structure. They are knowledge as non-conceptual objects. This is the source of their nobility.[18]

The expense of film production may make it impossible for a filmmaker to escape the "culture industry" absolutely. And yet the incorporation of low-definition video imagery into a work can undermine that enforced participation. We may indeed need a "theory of television," but we also need to use television, to understand the political and aesthetic value it may have. Walter Benjamin was one of the first to

acknowledge that the key to understanding technological art is through analysis of the viewing experience. This is and should be a crucial feature in the dialectics of the avant-garde.

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Notes

1. E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Regarding Television*, (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1983).

2. William Boddy, "Loving a Nineteen-Inch Motorola: American Writing on Television", in *Regarding Television*, p. 10.

3. These designations "culture industry" and "autonomous art" were not established as exclusive categories. However, it is significant that the Frankfurt School had no tools to deal with those works that might fall in between these designations. Of the filmmakers discussed in this paper, Ackerman and Rainer are fairly clearly "avant-garde", which is close enough to Adorno's conception of "autonomous". Wenders' films pose a problem in these terms, although it is likely that his romanticism would have committed him to Adorno's "industrial" category.

4. *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Ernst Bloch, George Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno*, (London: New Left Books, 1977).

5. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hanna Arendt, (New York: Schocken Paperbacks, 1969), p. 221.

6. Ibid., p. 221.

7. Ibid., p. 240.

8. Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*.

9. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1975). This work is cited by the authors in *Regarding Television* as frequently as Benjamin's various writings are.

10. Adorno, "Letter to Walter Benjamin, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 124.

11. Benjamin, p. 232.

12. This is not to suggest that Rainer's use of video is necessarily more "honest" in terms of documentation. The fact that we are given only fragments of what is evidently a hot and complicated political confrontation presupposes a selection process, rendering it intensely subjective in political rather than aesthetic terms.

13. Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology", in *Regarding Television, p. 12.*.

14. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Immagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 60.

15. Ibid., p. 45.

16. Bakhtin, "Discourse Typology and Prose," *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislaw Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, (MIT Press, 1971), pp. 183-84.

17. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (July-August 1984), p. 75.

18. Adorno, "Commitment," trans. Francis McDonagh, *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 193.