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Not Art: An Action History of British Underground Cinema

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**NOT ART : AN ACTION HISTORY OF
BRITISH UNDERGROUND CINEMA**

by

Duncan Reekie

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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THESIS CONTAINS

CD

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Abstract

NOT ART : AN ACTION HISTORY OF BRITISH UNDERGROUND CINEMA

My thesis is both an oppositional history and a (re)definition of British Underground Cinema culture (1959 - 2002). The historical significance of Underground Cinema has long been ideologically entangled in a mesh of academic typologies and ultra leftist rhetoric, abducting it from those directly involved. The intention of my work is to return definition to the 'object' of study, to write from within. This process involves viewing the history of modern British culture not as a vague monolithic and hierarchic spectrum but rather as a distinct historical conflict between the repressive legitimate Art culture of the bourgeoisie and the radical illegitimate popular culture of the working class. In this context, Underground Cinema can be (re)defined as a radical hybrid culture which fused elements of popular culture, Counterculture and Anti-Art. However, the first wave of Underground Cinema was effectively suppressed by the irrational ideology of its key activists and the hegemonic power of the Art tradition. They disowned the radical popular and initiated an Avant-Garde/Independent cinema project which developed an official State administrated bourgeois alternative to popular cinema.

My conclusion is that Underground Cinema still has the potential to become a radical and commercial popular culture but that this is now frustrated by an institutionalised State Art culture which has colonised the State funding agencies, higher education and the academic study of cinema. If the Underground is to flourish it must refuse and subvert this Art culture and renew its alliance with radical, experimental and commercial pop culture.

My methodology is an holistic interactive praxis which combines research, writing, film/ video making, digital design, performance and political activism. My final submission will be an open and heterodox mesh of polemic, history and entertainment. Its key components will be a written thesis which will locate this praxis within its intellectual context and a web site which will integrate my research and practice 1997-2003.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

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Relevant film screenings, festivals, conferences and seminars were attended and external institutions were visited for consultation purposes.

Papers presented at the *Independent Art School Conference* at Hull Time Based Arts, Hull, Oct. 2000 and at *Experimental Film Today* at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston July 2003.

Other conferences/events attended include *Rethinking the Avant-Garde*, Phoenix Arts, Leicester, Oct.1998, *The State of Independence* at the Lux Centre, London, Nov. 1998, *the 8th New York Underground Film Festival* at Anthology Film Archives, New York, 2001, *the Artists' Moving Image Review Seminar* at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London, 30th April 2002, *Shoot Shoot Shoot : the First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative and the British Avant-Garde Film 1966-76* at the Tate Modern, London May 2002, and the *AHRB British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection Study Day* at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London, 13th December 2002.

I have also been a key organiser of a series of Underground Cinema events including

monthly *Exploding Cinema* screenings in London 1997-2003, the *VOLCANO Underground Film and Video Festival* October 1997, November 1998 and 1999, the *Global Attic Film and Video Festival* held simultaneously in London, Brussels and Rotterdam, 20th June 1998 and two *Purple Circle Cinema Club* screenings in Falmouth, Cornwall 2002.

My film/video work has been widely screened including:

Shark Lust (Super/16mm 1999) a component of the international Underground feature film *MALDOROR* which has been widely screened throughout Europe and America including *the 8th New York Underground Film Festival* 2001 and *the 8th Chicago Underground Film Festival* 2001.

Son of Oedipus (Super 8 2001) Screened at the Exploding Cinema London, the Purple Circle Cinema Club, Falmouth, Cornwall, and the 2002 Cinematexas Festival, Texas.

Signed

D. Reelin

Date

2/3/04

Introduction

Methodology

This thesis is both an oppositional history and a (re)definition of the British Underground Cinema culture which was initiated in the late 1950s and which had an unprecedented resurgence in the early 1990s. The significance of the Underground for experimental film culture has long been entangled in a mesh of irrational academic typologies and pseudo Leftist rhetoric. My purpose is to strip away this mesh and so enable the contemporary participants of the culture to take effective action against anti-democratic, authoritarian and elitist tendencies within the wider culture of experimental film/ video. In opposition to Avant-Garde histories of experimental film and video, I shall (re)define Underground Cinema not as a historical phase or a medium specific aesthetic, but as an anarchic hybrid subculture which combines elements of experimental film and video, amateurism, Bohemianism and Anti-Art. The crucial strategy of this (re)definition will be to liberate the Underground from the legitimate history of Art and (re)contextulise it into the illegitimate and subversive history of popular culture.

This thesis is an *Action History* because it is a direct extension of my thirteen years of work as a key activist and filmmaker in the new London Underground Cinema movement. Although my argument is informed by academic study, its core was formed in practice, participation and experience. My activities during the five year period of my research project include : academic research and writing, film/ video making and performance, organising Underground cinema events, performance, teaching media production, and producing graphic and propaganda material for the Underground cinema movement. This is not a list of discrete and autonomous disciplines , but aspects of an interlocking holistic praxis , every component of which overlaps, informs and influences every other. This praxis is subjective and chaotic, it is implicated in a complex system of political contingencies, there is no cool objective vantage point outside the system, there is no alternative, no independence, there is only agency. I am writing as an agent from inside the Underground. However, this methodology should not be taken as a transgression

of established experimental film and video history since most of the key histories of British and American experimental film were written by activists and/or makers, including David Curtis, Steve Dwoskin, Malcolm Le Grice, Peter Gidal, Peter Wollen, Al Rees, Jonas Mekas, P.Adams Sitney and Amos Vogel. The subversion of my method is not my agency, it is my declaration of agency against the feigned objectivity and hidden agency of established experimental film and video history.

My primary research into the post-war amateur cine movement and the London Underground resurgence of the 1990s, is an original contribution to the study of experimental film and video. But the crucial originality of my thesis lies in the reformulation of the Underground as a radical popular culture. The broad generalism of this argument betrays the absolute specialism of my project; the innovation is my purpose, the liberation of the meaning, history and practice of Underground Cinema.

The critical framework of my argument has been informed and consolidated by a sequence of key texts, crucially Mikhail Bakhtin's influential study of carnival in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Peter Burger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Roger. L. Taylor's *Art An Enemy of the People* (1978), Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction , A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979), Victor Burgin's *The End of Art Theory* (1986), Stefan Szczelkun's *The Conspiracy of Good Taste*, (1993), David Bordwell's *Contemporary Film Theory and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory* (1996), Tom Gunning's *The Cinema of Attractions, Early Film, its Spectators and the Avant-Garde* (1990), A. Nicholas Vardac's *Stage To Screen, Theatrical Origins of Early Film: David Garrick to D.W.Griffith* (1949), Mike Dunford's *Experimental/Avant-Garde/Revolutionary Film Practice* (1976) and the essays of Sergei Eisenstein.

For both practical and theoretical reasons, the history of British *Avant-Garde* and *Independent* film in this text has been composed from predominately secondary

sources : practically, intensive primary research into the diverse and broad range of Avant-Garde and Independent film history lies beyond the scope and resources of this project; theoretically it is a critical imperative of this work to demonstrate that a subversive reading of Avant-Garde and Independent film history is possible within the confines of secondary material.

The structure of this text is complex and oblique. Rather than a progressive and discrete separation of subject areas, the chapters follow the formation and historical trajectory of a cluster of interrelated cultural currents and tendencies. Rather than a linear chronology of cause and effect or the mapping of decisive historical divisions, this history charts a spiral of similarities, continuities and transitions which advance around and towards the resurgence of the new Underground.

The full submission of my praxis has two core integrated but variant components : this thesis and a web site submitted in off-line CD Rom format. The web site is constructed around a version of this text which has been amended, structured and subdivided according to the cultural, technological and physiological contingencies of the web. The purpose of the web version is, first as a medium to incorporate the diversity of my praxis, second for the eventual on-line version to be a direct and active extension of my agency into the history of British experimental film and video, and third to be an experimental hybridisation of theoretical text and digital design informed by the research of my thesis.

A third element of my submission will be a live cinema event immediately prior to my final examination which will demonstrate the cinematic, sensual and convivial integration of my praxis. This event will feature my work :

Shark Lust	Super 8 / 16mm film. 1999.
Son of Oedipus	Super 8 film. 2001
Don't Go To Thebes	performance/music/35mm slides/video. 2002

The text of Don't Go To Thebes is included on the web site.

An Introduction to the Deceptive Typology of Experimental Film and Video.

(Re)defining the Underground will involve a complex unlocking and historical recontextualisation of terms. Not only a comprehensive investigation and reformulation of accepted academic critical typology but also the investigation of cultural forms which would traditionally be considered inappropriate to the study of experimental film and video. The breadth and density of my argument will range from the history of popular theatre and literature, to 19th century French Utopian Socialism, William Morris and the Folklore movement, the function of Avant-Garde Art, the amateur cine movement, the origins of State Art funding, Bohemian cabaret, and the student revolutions of 1968. This fluidity in turn requires certain critical terms to remain relatively fixed. *Experimental* is deployed in this text as a broad inclusive term to designate all the film and video makers, movements, work and practices which have consciously sought diversification against *or within* established film culture. By *diversification* I mean not only innovation but also opposition, alternativity, decentralisation, autonomy, hybridisation, transgression or reaction. Experimental is the term which covers the broadest range of work, it refers to both process and product, it adapts easily as both a noun and an adjective and it has been accepted by a significant number of divergent film movements and theorists as a transcendent historical term.¹ *Experimental* in this context would not be limited to formal experimentation but would include experiment in narrative, acting technique, sound, mise-en-scene, technology, working practices, exhibition, distribution and every and any aspect of film / video. Moreover, whereas institutionally the Avant-Garde and the Independent film and video sector have defined themselves against or outside the *mainstream* of *dominant* commercial popular cinema and television, this definition of experimental film / video would not automatically preclude experimental work within popular cinema, or subcultural forms which have historically been misinterpreted or omitted from histories of Avant-Garde and Independent

¹ Most recently *experimental* has been applied as a broad category by the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design which is part of the Arts and Humanities Research Board Centre for British Film and Television Studies. See the chronology : *Artists' Film and Experimental Film in Britain 1915-1999* available on the web site : www.research.linst.ac.uk/filmcentre

film/video, crucially Underground cinema, but also amateur film making, *cult* cinema, club visuals, porn and surf movies. Further, this definition of *experimental* should not enforce connotations of scientific objectivity but should allow practices of irrationality, playfulness, instinct, leisure and subjectivity. Finally, whilst many experimental film/video makers and movements have been involved in radical political struggle and whilst many have claimed that their practice is a radical political activity, there can be no automatic equivalence between experimental film and a radical struggle for the democratisation of film culture. Experimental film/video can have no essential moral or political value, since, as I intend to demonstrate, experimental makers have frequently advocated radical politics whilst actually pioneering new methods to maintain and modernise bourgeois authority.

Against a transcendental definition of experimental film and video, other key contemporary terms must be understood as relative and specific. The first British *Underground Cinema* lasted less than a decade as both a movement and a cultural category, it was realised in the counterculture of the early 1960s, but by the early 1970s it had been forsaken by its own activists. By the late 1970s it was dismissed as an adolescent phase of the *Avant-Garde* film movement which emerged from the London Film Makers Co-Op (L.F.M.C.), and/or the *Independent Film movement* which developed from the federation of the *Avant-Garde* and the radical Agit-prop collectives of the late 1960s. Throughout the 1970s various activists and theorists used the terms *Avant-Garde* and *Independent* as interchangeable, but by the end of the decade a clear terminological distinction had developed; *Avant-Garde film and video* had come to mean specifically film and video made by Artists, whilst *Independent Film and Video* identified the development of a broader movement which included the *Avant-Garde*, but also diverse makers, practices and genres conceived as independent of the ideological and industrial structures of both commercial cinema and television, and the State broadcasting network of the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.)² This Independent movement came to

² For the paradoxical concept of 'Independent' film see the Organising Committee for the IFA Conference (Simon Hartog, Claire Johnson, Paul Willemsen and others), *Independent Film-Making in the 70s*, compiled in Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels, Oppositional Film in Britain 1945-90*, BFI Publishing London. 1999.(P.126-137).

include a range of sub-movements and radical interest groups including; regional media workshops, community video makers, black filmmakers, leftist film collectives, women filmmakers, gay and lesbian filmmakers, radical documentary makers, Artists and Independent animators. During the late 1970s and early 1980s the Independent movement secured an extensive infrastructure of both regional and national State funding and distribution and participated in the development of Channel 4 , Cable TV and the reform of the TV and cinematic trade unions. But as the Independent movement expanded the Avant-Garde became increasingly isolated, arcane and bitter. ³ By the late 1980s British *Avant-Garde film and video* had become a historical term used only in a contemporary sense by the most die-hard adepts. It was consigned to history along with the terms *abstract film, expanded cinema, alternative cinema, parallel cinema, non-narrative film, absolute film, non-objective film, formal film and Structural-Materialist film*. The eventual adoption of the term *Artists film and video* by the key State agencies in the 1990s finally accomplished and recognised the process begun with the shift from *Underground* to *Avant-Garde* ; the legitimisation of a new *Art*.

Meanwhile the broader Independent movement lost its identity in the industrial, technological and organisational transformations of the 1980s. With the emergence of Channel 4 and the British Film Institute (B.F.I.) as major *independent* feature film producers and the massive expansion of *independent* production companies commissioned to make programmes for Channel 4, Cable, Satellite and eventually the B.B.C. , the concept of *independence* from a commercial mainstream became ever more difficult to rationalise. To be an *independent* film/ video maker was no longer an act of conscious political autonomy or radical

³ Deke Dusinberre, a leading critic of the 1970s Avant-Garde, writing in *Afterimage* in 1981 admitted : 'Its true, too true, that everyone here in England is bored by the avant-garde. Everyone - truly everyone - will acknowledge the importance of its role in nurturing that new champion dubbed 'British Independent film culture', but most of those (the politicians especially, and also the closet Hollywood-Mosfilm apologists) remain bored by the films, frustrated by their esoteric appeal, and seeking - no, demanding - a way out of the obligation to like them. For the rest (the Fine Art crowd), uneasiness surrounds the stale smell which, it is feared , belongs to the carcass of Modernism , which someone claims to have seen lifelessly nudging the muddy edge of the lake in St. James's. ' Deke Dusinberre, 'SEE REAL IMAGES !' *Afterimage* 8/9 Spring 1981.(P. 88). At the muddy edge of St. James's Park lies the Institute of Contemporary Arts (I.C.A.)

opposition, it was to be a freelancer in the deregulated media industry.⁴ By the mid-1990s leading Independent activists and agencies were questioning the contemporary relevance of the concept of *independence* and beginning to historicize the movement. ⁵ Nevertheless, although the movement has lost its ideological integrity there remains a complex national network of Independent film/ video agencies and institutions which is now so dependent on State funding that it can be identified as a sector of the State. It is the *Independent Sector* but it is not independent.

This text will also address the claims and strategies of radical film/ cultural Theory. By radical I mean that cluster of Marxist, Marxian, Socialist, and Libertarian ideologies that seek a revolutionary egalitarian and democratic transformation of society. Nowadays academic libraries and bookshops are loaded with books and journals of radical film/ cultural Theory : Marxist analysis, Post-Marxist analysis, Structuralist analysis, Post-Structural Deconstruction, Psychoanalytical film Theory, Feminist Film Theory, Queer Film Theory, Black film theory, Post-Colonial film theory, Cultural Studies, Postmodern analysis, White Studies, Post - Theory etc. As a genre, this literature legitimises its radicalism through the dispassionate authority of academic objectivity. Against this conventional and often bogus objectivity I have chosen engagement and indiscretion.

⁴ In 1995 the selector of the third Institute of Contemporary Arts (I.C.A.) Biennial of Independent Film and Video , John Wyver stated that: 'In the mid-1990s in Britain there is no independent film and video culture. None - at least none of the kind so clearly identifiable 15 years ago, and none with any significant presence. No independent film avant-garde , no independent video art production.....this is a state which we might - cautiously - celebrate.' Wyver was the influential director of Illuminations, the production company responsible for the first broadcast TV compilations of Independent film and video in the 1980s. His contention in the catalogue essay for the Biennial was that the Independent sector was now totally *dependent* on television. From *What You See Is What You Get : Catalogue Essay for the 3rd ICA Biennial of Independent Film and Video 1995*. Two years later at the fourth and last I. C. A. Biennial in 1997 the selection included five major broadcast TV commercials; Adidas, Polaroid, Capital Radio, AT & T and Guinness. See *The Raw and the Cooked, catalogue for the 4th ICA Biennial of Independent Film and Video 1997*.

⁵ In the autumn of 1996 Steve McIntyre the then Chief Executive of the London Film and Video Development Agency , the State funding body for the capital , commented in an article on the future for film funding: 'Unlike traditional funders, however, the LFDVA undertakes activity itself.....it could be argued that this approach is setting the LFDVA in competition with the independent sector it is there to fund. The problem with this argument is that it assumes there is still such a thing as a coherent 'independent sector', with its own agenda and plans . There isn't . Perhaps there never was.' Steve McIntyre, 'The Very Model of a Modern Funding Agency', *Vertigo* 5 .1996.

I studied film Theory at college and at University in the 1980s. I studied film Theory because I loved cinema and I wanted to make radical films. I thought that if I learnt how to theoretically de-construct film I could use theoretical techniques to construct new films of my own. But the radical film Theory I encountered was composed of arcane jargon and intensely complex linguistic, psychoanalytic and philosophical references, and it seemed to me that it was riddled with inconsistencies and fundamental paradoxes. I couldn't understand how the analytic models of Theory related to radical filmmaking and I was constantly frustrated by the ever shifting fashions and terrain of contemporary Theory. After University I gave up Theory and started to make short no-budget films and to apply for State production funding, only to discover that the State funded Independent sector was legitimised and structured by the very Theoretical discourses I had struggled with as a student. I began to realise that the Independent sector was actually the audio/visual element of a broader State project engaged in the integrated production, distribution and exhibition of a legitimate film/video culture. With this revelation I began to make films which were designed to subvert and implode the Independent sector and its Theoretical base. Eventually this subversive project forced me to investigate and engage with the academic institutions I loathed. I returned to the academy to discover why in spite of row upon row of sexy shiny books, in spite of the scores of dedicated professionals with their intensely complex theories and scientific language, why in spite of the debates and the courses and the endless articles in respected journals, why British radical filmmaking and the Independent film and video sector had become politically, culturally and industrially wretched. Which is to say that a key element of my research has been as a participant observer in the realm of Theory : an Underground agent in the academy.

My argument in this text is prodigiously broad but it still contains many significant omissions and exclusions, including for instance : Third Cinema theory, the contemporary German Underground film scene, the history of Australian Underground cinema, a history of amateur video etc. The absence of most of these elements can be justified in the name of the dynamic and coherence of the

argument. But there are two crucial omissions that need at least a brief explanation, the first is the absence of an integrated historical assessment of Soviet experimental film 1917-1930. The second is the absence of an analysis of the *formal* qualities of Underground film. In the first case, I will make reference to Soviet experimental cinema, and later, I will even develop a reinterpretation of Eisenstein's theory of montage. However, a functional investigation of the complexity and specificity of Soviet experimental cinema lies beyond the scope of this text. Moreover, whilst it is true that Soviet cinema was invoked as a radical model by the nascent British Avant-Garde and Independent sector, it must also be understood that their social and industrial contexts were irreconcilable ; the Avant-Garde constituted itself as an alternative within capitalism, whilst Soviet experimental film was for a brief season the cinematic vanguard of a revolutionary communist society. In the second case, the focus of this text is Underground cinema not Underground film ; the critical axis of this thesis is cultural, not aesthetic. This does not preclude intermittent analysis of specific films or makers, but this will always be in the context of the industrial and political culture of experimental *cinema*. Likewise, the practical elements of my thesis must be understood as work produced from and for the culture of Underground Cinema.

The Contemporary Context of the Text : the New Underground Cinema, the Fall of the Lux and the Advent of Artists Film and Video.

The contemporary context of this history is London's experimental film, video and digital moving image culture from the late 1980s to 2003. The primary elements of this context are : first the development of the new Underground Cinema ; second the rise and fall of the Lux Centre for Film Video and Digital Arts (September 1997 - October 2001) ; and last the shift in institutional Art taxonomy from *Avant-Garde Film* to *Artists Film and Video*.

The Lux

On the 19th of September 1997 the new Lux Centre for Film, Video and New Media opened in Hoxton Square in Shoreditch in the East End of London. In former times Hoxton had been a ramshackle working class district of small manufacturing workshops, disused warehouses and council estates. Around the early 1990s young Artists and Art students began to move into the area attracted by the cheap rent for studio space, the proximity to the city centre and the gritty urban ambience. Following the Artists and encouraged by local council initiatives, Art Galleries, trendy bars, clubs and coffee shops opened in the district, and web design companies, graphic designers, magazines and other creative agencies rented offices. By the late 1990s the area had become known as *Shoho*, the Shoreditch Soho. The hub of this gentrification was Hoxton Square which was dominated by the imposing glass and steel facade of the Lux centre.

The Lux was purpose built as a joint initiative to house two interlinked experimental media organisations : the London Filmmakers Co-Operative (L.F.M.C. established 1966) and London Electronic Arts (L.E.A. established as London Video Arts 1976). The L.F.M.C. was one of the last surviving radical media collectives that emerged from the 1960s Counterculture. Originally it was an anarchic screening/distribution group for Underground Cinema but from the early 1970s both the L.F.M.C. and its film making practice became increasingly

institutionalised and dependent on direct and indirect State patronage.

The eventual move to the Lux had an initial cost of 4.5 million pounds raised mostly from National Lottery funding administered by the Arts Council of England, but with contributions and support from other agencies including the British Film Institute (B.F.I.), the London Film and Video Development Agency (LFVDA), Channel Four television and the European Regional Development Fund. The centre comprised a cinema, an Art gallery, production and post-production facilities, extensive offices and distribution library/ storage space. In style and ambience the Lux was somewhere between a prestigious public museum and an affluent commercial media facilities house. At the most successful festivals and gallery openings the bosky square was packed with celebrating Artists, students and media liggers ; often there would be installations and projections from the gallery ; blue pixilated windows in the dark night.

On the first of January 1999 the Lux proudly announced the merger of the L.E.A. and the L.F.M.C. to form the unified Lux Centre for Film, Video and Digital Arts. What they didn't announce was, that since its inception the Lux had consistently failed to generate the turnover to meet its running costs and that the two groups were forced into the merger as a condition of the funding agencies saving them from financial ruin. Neither did the programme acknowledge that the merger was only really extinguishing the final vestige of the L.F.M.C. : its name. The London Filmmakers Co-Operative had not actually been a *Co-Operative* since 1995, when as a condition of financing the move to the new building the State funding agencies required the L.F.M.C. to abolish its radical democratic/ common ownership constitution and to adopt a normalised hierarchical industrial structure.

⁶ Nevertheless, between the abolition of the Co-Op structure and the unification of the Lux, the L.F.M.C continued to charge an annual membership fee and to

⁶ The L.F.M.C. was perhaps the last of the democratic/ common ownership media collective to submit to an historical process of State induced industrial normalisation which was initiated in the mid 1970s.

This process was accelerated in the mid 1980s by the codes of practice developed by the State funding agencies and the Association of Cinematographic and Television Technicians (A.C.T.T.) in the Grant-Aided Workshop Production Declaration. See Margaret Dickinson, *Ibid.* 1999. (P. 58-59). Exemplary groups effected by this process would include Four Corners and Liberation Films.

accept new members who probably never realised that there were no *members* of the Co-Operative, since there was no Co-Operative.

Despite the merger, and a Recovery Plan administrated by the Arts Council, the Lux sank further into debt and eventually the funders decided to cut their losses. On the 2nd of October 2001 the Lux closed in mid operation, the staff and clients were removed from the building and the locks were changed.

The fall of the Lux was the failure of the most ambitious project in the history of British experimental film and video. It ruined the L.F.M.C. and L.E.A. and it provided all future potential funders of experimental media exhibition and distribution with an infamous precedent. For a culture in which lone makers and small groups constantly struggle to make self financed films/videos with budgets under £500 the relative loss is unforgivable. The causes of the Lux's downfall have been variously attributed to managerial incompetence, internecine schisms, debts accrued by the L.F.M.C. before the merger, reckless Lottery funding policy and political intervention. Perhaps the final and most debilitating factor was that the Lux building was never actually purchased, but only rented by the B.F.I. from the property developers. As Hoxton became ever more gentrified the developers increased the rent and although the B.F.I. was committed to supporting the rent payments, they finally reneged on the deal.⁷

But the underlying cause of the Lux's fall is far more complex than high rent and incompetence, it must be discovered in the history of Avant-Garde film and the decline of the Independent Film and Video movement. The inevitable question is : How did a supposedly radical voluntary organisation get fatally involved in a commercially incompetent public/private partnership predominantly financed by the gambling losses of ordinary people who had no need or desire for Film, Video and Digital Art ?

⁷ For the debate surrounding the fall of the Lux see Benedict Seymour, 'The Last Picture Show', *Mute Magazine*, Issue 22. Jan.2002 and also the Letters Page, *Mute Magazine*, Issue 23. March. 2002 .

History

Three months after the unification of the Lux, the B.F.I. published *A History of Experimental Film and Video* by Al Rees the 'first major history of avant-garde film and video to be published in more than twenty years.'⁸ Rees' history is roughly half general overview of the Avant-Garde canon and half a chronology of specifically British Avant-Garde film and video 1966-98. In December 1998 the Lux staged a three day retrospective of *expanded cinema* to celebrate the forthcoming publication.

Rees himself was a crucial and active agent in the British Avant-Garde, yet his *History* is written *objectively*, and he never really acknowledges his own involvement in the events he documents. His activities span over twenty years, and when his book was published he linked three of the most influential agencies in the sector, first as a Senior Research Fellow at the Royal College of Art, second as Chairman of the selection panel for Visual Arts Artists Film and Video at the Arts Council of England and last as a Theorist published by the BFI. As chairman of the Artists Film and Video sub-committee Rees was working with fellow panel members including the Artists George Barber, Tacita Dean and William Raban and most interestingly for my story, the Theorist/filmmaker Laura Mulvey, author of the highly influential article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), and co-maker, with her then husband Peter Wollen, of the films *Penthesilea* (1974) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977).⁹ Rees also served on the Artists Film Subcommittee of the Arts Council from 1978-85, and so he was responsible, with his fellow eight / ten panel members, for selecting the 50-60 filmmakers who were awarded production funding out of the many hundreds of applications received by the Arts council in that 8 year period. These selected filmmakers would include practically every British film / video maker that is cited in Rees' history from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. Rees therefore actually had an executive role in the production of the work he historicizes. In other words, the work and the makers that Rees cites as historically significant are the work and the makers that he helped select for production. Rees' *History* is not a representative objective overview of a culture

⁸ A.L. Rees *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, BFI Publishing London. 1999. (Back cover.)

⁹ Laura Mulvey (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Autumn 1975.

subjected to either intense public interest or commercial competition; it is the subjective account of a participant in a closed system of reciprocal justification.¹⁰ Rees writes from a nexus of institutional power and yet he affects the mythical disinterest of independence; my work opposes this *independence* with engagement and indiscretion.

The Return of the Underground

Something happened in the early 1990s which did not fit into Rees' chronology, although in his book he does give it 65 words.¹¹ Actually, it didn't fit into any official chronology.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, parallel to the final State co-option of the Independent sector, a new Underground Cinema movement emerged from the activities of a cluster of popular and unfunded experimental cinema clubs. This rapid and widespread renovation was arguably the most significant development in British experimental media since the Underground movement of the 1960s, in fact the new Underground has been far more significant than its predecessor in terms of audience attendance, active participants and film/video production. It has screened the work of hundreds of film/video makers which would otherwise have remained unseen and it has fostered a substantial heterogeneous and loyal

¹⁰ The compromised objectivity and male dominance of American Avant-Garde film history has been challenged by incisive feminist critiques from Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom, Patricia Mellencamp and Lauren Rabinowitz. See Constance Penley, *The Future of an Illusion, Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London (1989), Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions : Avant-Garde Film, Video and Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, (1990) and Lauren Rabinowitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema 1943-71*, University of Illinois, Chicago (1991).

¹¹ '...other younger film and video artists were to be seen en masse at the 'Pandaemonium' ICA festival. But for some, programmes such as these, however diverse, are limited by jury selection and official imprimatur. In response groups like the Exploding Cinema and festivals such as 'Volcano' in London continue to promote the classic underground principles of non-selected, open screenings and avoid the more high profile venues. The current organ of this movement, *Filmwaves* (1997), is dedicated simply to 'low-budget film-makers and audiences'. A.L. Rees, *Ibid.* 1999. (P.119) The Exploding Cinema is also mentioned in a footnote, 170. (P.145)

popular audience for experimental film.¹² And yet within the cultural descendants of the 1960s Underground, (the Independent Sector and Artists film and Video), and within the institutions of film/ cultural Theory , (educational institutions, magazine and book publishing, conferences etc.) the new Underground Cinema has been both industrially and theoretically non-existent. There has been no acknowledgement of the Underground in any of the Independent Sector's journals (eg. Screen, Sight and Sound, Coil and Vertigo), there has been almost no contact from any of its institutions (eg.. the British Film Institute, the Arts Council, the AHRB British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection etc.) and no attempt has been made to represent it at any of its festivals (eg.. the I. C. A. Biennial , Pandaemonium etc.). This total absence cannot be attributed to the obscurity or hostility of the new Underground scene since its activists have developed spectacular and populist publicity strategies : interventions at debates and festivals, an internationally acclaimed network of web sites, interviews on national T.V. and Radio and articles in both the national press and popular/ cultural magazines.¹³ Neither can it be attributed to a lack of resources or initiative in the Independent Sector ; the sector has a comprehensive network of highly educated professional researchers and Theoreticians, moreover since the advent of the new Underground it has responded by producing a cluster of TV programmes and events which attempt to fabricate the *trendy subcultural style* of the Underground whilst actually showcasing their own State funded institutional products amongst now safe Underground *classics* from the 1960s. ¹⁴ The institutional invisibility of the Underground is not due to inefficiency or the result of an elaborate

¹² The historical significance of the new Underground lies not only in its relative magnitude but also in its international links, its diversity and its popularity. These issues will be elaborated in Chapter 13. For information on the Underground see *Filmwaves* magazine 1997 -2003 and websites including *the Exploding Cinema* : www.explodingcinema.org, *Chaosfilmgruppe* : www.filmgruppe-chaos.de/menu.html, *The Halloween Society* : www.collective.co.uk/halloween/ , *My Eyes...My Eyes* : www.myeyes.dircon.co.uk/ , *The New York Underground Film Festival* : www.nyuff.com/ *OMSK - The Home Site* : www.pinkpink.demon.co.uk/ and *Undercurrents* : www.undercurrents.org/.

¹³ This would include amongst many others B.B.C. Radio Four 4/4/95, B.B.C. Radio Three 28/10/95, *the Guardian*, 9/7/1993 (P.6) , *the Observer* 5/9/1993, *The Face*, No. 60 September 1993 (P.144-145), *Time Out*, October 23 -30 1996 (P.28-29), and *Time Out*, June 16-23 1999 (P.26).

¹⁴ The TV compilations included *Midnight Underground* (Illuminations for Ch. 4). and *Expanding Pictures* (Arts Council/BBC 2). The events included *Dirty and Dangerous*, at the I.C.A 1997, *Underground America*, at the Barbican 1999, and Mark Weber's *Little Stabs at Happiness* at the I.C.A. in the late 1990s.

conspiracy. It is because the Independent sector cannot recognise the Underground without acknowledging that it has become more repressive than the *mainstream* cinema it claims to oppose.

Reader, be careful in what follows and do not conflate people and agencies with their names or their declarations of intent. Eventually we will consider what *independence* and *autonomy* actually mean , for now remember, although the L.F.M.C. ceased to exist in 1995, its name lived on for four more years.

Section A : Art/Not Art

A decisive factor in the development of modern Western culture was a conflict between the legitimate and official institution of bourgeois Art and the illegitimate and unofficial popular culture of the people. To understand the historical development of the Underground Cinema movement we must first contextualise the history of popular cinema both as a product of this conflict and as a critical site of contention.

This first section will consider the origins of the division between Art and popular culture, the techniques deployed by Art culture to suppress the popular, and the strategies developed by the popular to evade, resist and transcend that suppression.

Chapter one will consider the historical divergence of the popular from legitimate culture and then trace the development of a repertoire of subversive popular techniques and strategies by performers and writers in opposition to bourgeois suppression and sedation. Although the cultures considered in this chapter are theatrical and literary, I will later argue that the subversive strategies they developed were elements in the generation of popular cinema and the Underground cinema movement.

Chapter two will consider the historical formation of Art in opposition to the popular, the paradoxical agency of the Avant-Garde, and the ascension of Modernist abstraction, the fetish of pure Art.

Finally chapter three will consider the development of models of culture which sought to historicize, rationalise and maintain the legitimacy of Art and the rift between Art and the popular.

Chapter One

An Historical Outline of the Illegitimate Popular Tradition : Continuity and Resistance.

Carnival

In his highly influential study *Rabelais and His World* (1965) the indomitable Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin identifies European mediaeval popular culture as an unofficial culture of carnival which had developed out of thousands of years of ancient ritual and festival.¹⁵ In mediaeval Europe culture was divided into two distinct modes : the official culture of the Christian Church and the feudal State, and the unofficial popular culture of the carnival, the market place and the tavern. Official culture was rigidly hierarchical and served to demonstrate and maintain the divine prestige of God, the monarchy, the Church and the nobility. Popular culture existed outside and alternative to the official culture and its defining character was the comic/ festive ritual of the carnival. Before the development of modern social class and State structure, comic/ festive ritual was an integral element of the unified culture of the people, as class and State developed, so the comic/ festive elements of culture were excluded from official culture and became the alternative popular culture of carnival which opposed the official serious culture with feasts, festivals, games, masks, drama, fools, jugglers, profanity, trained animals, monsters, laughter and parody. Sharing the feast days and Holy Days of the mediaeval year , carnival mimicked and mocked sacred feudal rituals and protocols with comic carnival ritual, it became a second life which existed outside official life, and for its duration it was a different way of living, a realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance.

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin , *Rabelais and His World* , trans. Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984. Francois Rabelais was an ex-Franciscan and Benedictine monk who between 1532 and 1564 wrote the satiric, bawdy and fabulous history of Gargantua and Pantagruel in which there appears the hedonistic proto anarchist utopia of the Abbey of Theleme, governed by a single law: 'Do what you will ' See Francois Rabelais, *The History of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, translated by J.M.Cohen. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex.1955.(P.159) also Peter Marshall , *Demanding the Impossible. A History of Anarchism* Fontana Press, London 1992.(P.108-109)

The characteristic carnival form is grotesque realism , the popular humour which degrades all that is high, spiritual, ideal and abstract, which brings life back to the material, to the people and to the body. ¹⁶ The carnival grotesque is both positive and negative, it is the womb and the grave, shit and birth, piss and wine, the corpse and the seed, the old and the young. It is the abundance and fertility of the body even in the grotesque degradation of death and deformity, it is the body of the people ; of all the people. The laughter of the carnival is ambivalent, nothing is sacred, no one is exempt, the boundaries of life are transgressed.

The carnival is :

Alternative - it lies outside and opposes the official and serious culture of both the Church and the nobility.

Participatory - there is no border between the audience and the performance, everyone and anyone can be the carnival.

Ambivalent - it contains both the positive and the negative, a diversity of elements in combination but it does not end this diversity by imposing authority, it celebrates ambivalence, it mutates and transforms.

Material - it degrades the abstract and the ideal and celebrates the body and the life of the people.

Utopian - the carnival is a temporary realm of liberty, equality, abundance and happiness. It frees the imagination from the orthodox and the conventional and reveals the possibility of change and the relativity of existence.

Anarchic - there can be no central or single control over the carnival since it is the sum and diversity of its participants.

¹⁶ Bakhtin. Ibid.1984. (P.20.)

Transgressive - it transposes, inverts and subverts.

The carnival plays with social and sexual identity.

Unfinished - the carnival is always in process.

Although mediaeval culture functioned in two distinct modes these modes were not discrete or mutually exclusive. The official culture served to integrate every citizen into the great feudal hierarchy, but citizens of every rank both clerical and secular celebrated the temporary freedom of the carnival. Carnival was sanctioned by the official culture and structured by the official calendar, but it would be wrong to suppose that it was only the spectacle of freedom, a cultural safety valve, a means by which the church and the nobility contained and enervated all subversive social energy.¹⁷ The church may have exploited the carnival as a means to contain subversion, but the carnival exploited the church as means to celebrate subversion. Carnival was too unstable and anarchic for the official culture to control and would frequently result in violent social clashes or even insurrection.¹⁸ Moreover, to consider mediaeval carnival as a cultural form separate from political action is a misconception based on a post 18th century perception of politics as a discrete social activity.¹⁹ Carnival was political, as religion was political; carnival could explode into revolt, and revolt could release the carnival. Neither can Carnival be contained under the category *entertainment* or *leisure*, because whilst the carnival was temporary it could also become a subversive means and a political end; the carnival held within it the demand for the Carnivalisation of the world.

Bakhtin celebrates the mediaeval culture of the carnival, but he does this in the context of its relevance to the development of the classic literature of the Renaissance; Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Dante and Boccaccio etc. He

¹⁷ For a survey of refutations of the 'safety valve' theory see John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. (1994), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1996 (P.192-197)

¹⁸ See Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1996. and also Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Mediaeval London*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford. 1993.

¹⁹ P. Stallybrass and A. White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Methuen, London 1986. (P.14.)

asserts that there would have been no Renaissance without the carnival , for in the carnival tradition the key figures of the Renaissance found the freedom to escape the rigid orthodoxy of feudal Christianity and so to reinterpret the ancient humanist classics.²⁰ But this consummation in turn marked its decline, after the Renaissance the carnival was suppressed and domesticated, although the tradition survived in a residual form and grotesque carnival imagery reappeared transformed in Romanticism.

But Bakhtin's assessment of the carnival must be understood in the context of the repressive Stalinist Soviet academic literary studies of the 1940s. From a contemporary context it is clear that there was no discrete end to the carnival, that in fact carnival was syncretically integrated and modified as the defining tradition of a continuous, mercurial and rejuvenating popular culture which can be mapped out of the mediaeval into the present. The Renaissance marks not the end of carnival but the decline of its legitimate status and the beginning of a divided European culture.

The Rift in Culture

Whilst both the common people and the upper classes participated in European mediaeval popular culture, from the 16th century onwards the division between popular culture and the official culture of the upper classes increasingly widened.²¹ The critical determinant of this separation was the waning of the feudal order, the emergence of the bourgeoisie and the development of the technologies of capitalism.²² The historical development of popular culture after the Renaissance was determined by a tension between its increasing commodification in the emergence of bourgeois capitalism and by the attempts of the ascendant bourgeoisie to prohibit, suppress, exclude and control it. As bourgeois culture defined itself in the suppression of the popular, so popular culture developed in resistance to that suppression. The carnival tradition though syncretic,

²⁰ Bakhtin, Ibid 1984. (P.273-275.)

²¹ See the classic study : Peter Burke, *Popular culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978). Wildwood, House Ltd. , Aldershot .1988 (P.208-286)

²² Arnold Hauser, Ibid.Vol.2 ,1968. (P.131-158)

underground and often invisible, runs unbroken into contemporary popular culture. It has developed, diverged and mutated, but its historical development is contiguous and material.

As their economic power grew, the Renaissance bourgeoisie increased their social status from below and above, since not only did they marry into the nobility but they also recruited the nobility into the bourgeois professions. Far from levelling the social order this mobility increased the significance of class difference as an indicator of social value. The emergent bourgeoisie did not want to dismantle the feudal hierarchy, they wanted to ascend it. The feudal nobility who had lived in confidence of their ancient divine right to rule now turned increasingly to culture as proof of their superiority. A process of gradual and regional cultural separation was initiated which had two essential elements: first the historical formation of a discrete and autonomous ruling class culture; and second, attempts to reform and suppress popular culture.

The formation of a ruling class culture began with a Renaissance reformation of manners; the ruling classes increasingly withdrew themselves both culturally and materially from the company of the *people*, a category they now cast off. They no longer dined in great halls with their retainers but withdrew into private dining rooms, they no longer sported at the carnival or danced in the marketplace and popular ritual and remedy were dismissed as error, ignorance and folly. In imitation of the Royal courts they began to develop a refined and codified way of behaving and communicating; a polite and courteous society. Through improved technologies of travel and communication and the expansion of formal and classical education, this elite culture became standardised. They cultivated a separate polite form of speech or dialect from the common people and sometimes even a different language altogether.²³ In Britain the ruling classes gradually developed a dialect and accent which in a 20th century form eventually became the official State dialect enforced by the national State broadcasting corporation, the B.B.C.

²³ Peter Burke, *Ibid.* 1988. (P. 272).

The suppression and proscription of popular culture in England was initially attempted as an element of the successive phases of the Protestant Reformation. ²⁴ The Protestant ethic was essentially bourgeois; godliness, order, reason, discipline, industry, modesty, thrift, restraint and temperance. The Reformation attitude towards popular culture was that the divide between the sacred and the profane should be absolute, there should be no ambivalence. Whereas the Catholic church had previously tolerated or even encouraged carnival and festive ritual, the puritans of the Reformation considered it to be lewd, shameless, idle, obscene and intoxicated, moreover they denounced certain popular practices as blasphemy and devil worship. Churches were stripped of all ungodly decoration, ornament and ritual. Sermons which drew on the comedy, myth and technique of carnival were discouraged, and uneducated popular parish priests were often replaced by university educated upper class Protestants. Mediaeval religious drama was effectively eliminated and key festive rituals were prohibited. However, the crucial effect of the Reformation was not to eliminate popular culture or even impede its *popularity* but to transform it into a secular and illegitimate culture, and to widen the divide between the popular and the legitimate culture of the emergent bourgeoisie. ²⁵

Fairs at the Border of the Law

Whilst the emergent bourgeoisie were initiating the suppression of popular culture the expansion of the capitalist economy and advancements in technology were paradoxically expanding, innovating and diversifying the popular. Carnival was always a festival of the market place but from around the 11th century onwards the great mediaeval annual fairs developed as hybrid combinations of carnival, Holy Days, festive ritual and international trade. The leading English fairs at Stourbridge, Nottingham, Colchester, Norwich, Kings Lynn and St.

Bartholomew in London became major trading centres for both local and

²⁴ Peter Burke, *Ibid.* 1988.) (P.244- 286).

²⁵ The misconception that the Reformation effectively terminated the popular tradition is comprehensively challenged by Ronald Hutton in his two influential studies : Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* ,Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1994.. and Ronald Hutton , *The Stations of the Sun* ,Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1996. See Ronald Hutton, *Ibid.* 1996.(P.408-427)

travelling merchants from across continental Europe.²⁶ Following the institutional displacement of carnival in the Reformation so the fairs became the secular, illegitimate and commercial hubs of the popular tradition. The two predominant and interactive modes of this tradition were popular performance and popular literature. The key characteristics of these modes were conviviality, variety and montage.

The legitimate culture which began to develop with the Renaissance was a Classicism which consecrated the creative values of authority, order, unity, purity and perfection, and opposed the vulgarity, chaos and carnal pleasures of the people. The concept of the citizen that eventually emerged from this legitimate culture was the private and domestic individual of bourgeois society. The Classical body was conceived as perfect, hermetic and autonomous, neither young or old, its apertures sealed, its bodily functions hidden.²⁷ On the contrary the illegitimate popular culture was driven by the creative force of difference and combination. The Renaissance fair developed as a chaotic, vulgar and heterodox intersection of carnival and commerce which although regionally diverse and localised was also a transient tradition of shifting forms and variations which moved across regional boundaries. Crucial agents in this cultural migration were the bands of itinerant professional performers, show-people and peddlers who travelled from fair to fair visiting the towns and villages along the route. These nomadic performers travelled both individually and as troupes, many travelled far from the countries and cultures of their birth and many were gypsies. The fair became a temporary cosmopolitan city of booths, boards and painted banners where commodities were traded, plays were performed, ballad singers, puppet shows and travelling entertainers hawked for custom, teeth were pulled, charlatans peddled medicine, freaks were exhibited, animals performed tricks and amongst the crowd moved every class of humanity, from inquisitive nobility to the lowest peasants, punks, pimps, bawds, thieves, quacks, mountebanks and beggars.

The first great technological innovation to transform popular culture was the

²⁶ Ian Starsmore, *English Fairs*, Thames and Hudson, London 1975. (P.12)

²⁷ Bakhtin. *Ibid.* 1984. (P.29.)

development of a popular literature made possible in England by the advent of printing in the mid 15th century. ²⁸ By the mid 17th century popular literature had become a thriving culture of single sheet broadsides, paper covered books and pamphlets sold by the thousands at fairs, on street stalls, and hawked by itinerant vendors and ballad mongers. This unofficial literature dealt in songs and stories of love and romance, sensational tales of outlaws, violent crime, witchcraft, monsters, miraculous events and bizarre intrigues. ²⁹ Moreover, the advent of mass printing also expanded popular visual culture; broadsides and pamphlets were frequently illustrated with woodcuts, and text could also be graphically composed. By the end of the 17th century there were broadsides which had developed all the essential formal techniques of the comic strip : a narrative would be told by a series of discreet framed images, the temporal action of the narrative was constructed as a montage from frame to frame and the speech of characters in the narrative was indicated by banners, speech clouds or bubbles issuing from their mouths. ³⁰ The ballad seller was often both a hawker of broadsides and a performer, the selling of ballads was a show. To attract an audience the hawkers used a comic sales patter, they would sing and play their ballads, and sometimes they would have a set of illustrations depicting the subject of the ballad, which they would indicate with a wooden pointer. ³¹ In 1695 State legislation permitted a vast increase in the establishment of printers throughout the country and in the production and distribution of popular material. By the early 18th century the popularity of the unwieldy broadside had declined and was replaced by the dominance of the chapbook , a small paper covered book which contained ballads, narrative strips, popular tales, romances, prophecy, political propaganda, sensational crimes etc. These were sold by travelling vendors known as Chapmen who would hawk their stock at public gatherings in the cities at fairs, public

²⁸ Although the common people were mostly illiterate at this time , the ability amongst the population to read though unable to write is often underestimated. See Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Literature* Penguin, Harmondsworth , Middlesex.1977. (P.53-55)

²⁹ L.Shepherd, *The History of Street Literature*, David and Charles, Newton Abbott, Devon.1973 (P.16-17.) In addition to sensational tales, handbills and almanacs, there were also autobiographies by popular writers and personalities, and political and religious tracts, amongst which were the tracts of the Diggers and the Ranters of the English revolution. See Peter Burke, *Ibid.*1988. (P.263).

³⁰ See David Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip, Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsides from c.1450-1825*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles C.A. 1973.

³¹ Peter Burke, *Ibid.*1988.(P.95).

executions, alehouses, coffee houses or would travel to the market towns and more remote rural communities. ³²

The permanent and professional theatres of Renaissance London developed from the Mystery plays, pageants and temporary carnival theatres of the fair during a period of sustained attack upon popular culture by both the State and by Puritan reformers. In an age where a new social mobility began to threaten the feudal hierarchy and the country was riven with religious conflict and civil insurrection, the theatre was viewed by the ruling class as a potential threat to the social order. The power of this threat was attributed to the anarchic chaos of the carnival. ³³

For its duration the drama of the carnival drops out of the hierarchy of the feudal State, the common players take on the guises and regalia of nobility or even divinity, and yet they also ambivalently remain themselves, free to shift their identity between the real and the dramatic world: this is the *play*. The play also drops out of time, it resists the feudal time of productive labour and threatens the authority of history, for it brings the past and the mythical into the present. There is no unified authority which controls the meaning or the language of the play, it is ephemeral and unfinished, it is created by the diverse performances of the players and the shared culture of the audience. As the carnival theatre became established in permanent playhouses so its subversive potential intensified for it was no longer contained by the official sanction of the feudal calendar or the social authority of the mediaeval guilds.

The playhouse became the site of a utopian collective and promiscuous transgression and hybridisation of culture, a temporary zone in which classical learning, the grotesque, poetry, slapstick, tragedy, comedy, mime and reality interacted and hybridised. ³⁴ But harassed by legitimate repression, and driven by the ascendant power of capitalism, the playhouses of the early 17th century began to negotiate a new legitimacy by adopting the conditions of literature. A process

³² Victor E. Neuburg . *Ibid.* 1977.(p.102-108)

³³ See Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre*, Methuen. London and New York.1985. (P.116-117).

³⁴ Michael D. Bristol. *Ibid.*1985. (P.123)

was initiated in which the anonymous improvisational collectivity of carnival theatre was replaced by the individual author and the authority of a text corresponding to the educational and moral status of official literature. With an authoritative text the author became accountable to the State and subject to the law, but they also became the individual master and owner of the text and so able to sell their text as a commodity; the players become mere servants who act out the text. This process of *authorisation* became a crucial strategy in the bourgeois suppression and appropriation of popular culture. Exemplary in this process is the historical trajectory of Shakespearean drama, which emerged from the convivial popular theatre of the Renaissance but became by the 19th century a strategic site for the bourgeois authorisation of theatre. ³⁵

The tradition of popular theatre which developed from the carnival was constituted on dramatic convention. All drama depends upon a system of conventions understood and maintained by both the audience and the performers. ³⁶ The fundamental convention mutually agreed between the performers and the audience is to frame the drama; to begin it, to sustain it and to end it. The audience must understand where the world ends and the performance begins. The Naturalist drama of the late 19th and 20th century replaced the necessity for an agreed conventional framing between audience and performance with a set of institutional, technological and mimetic strategies (the proscenium stage, temporal continuity etc). The carnival play on the other hand depended almost entirely on convention. It had to negotiate its frame with a recognised audience, it was interactive and communal. The audience was directly addressed

³⁵ Shakespeare was played with great success to both upper class and popular audiences throughout the 18th and into the mid 19th century, but there was no single authentic version, the text was often abridged and adapted, and the convivial audience would often interrupt or contribute to the performance. However, by the mid 19th century a new bourgeois theatre audience was rejecting popular Shakespeare and demanding an authentic text. In New York on May 10th 1849 the conflict between the popular and the authentic exploded into mass protest : the Astor Place Riot. When , despite long running popular opposition, an authentic English Macbeth was performed at the Astor Place Opera House, ten thousand rioters lay siege to the building showering the elegant windows with stones to cries of "Burn the damned den of the aristocracy !". Overwhelmed the cops called in the armed militia who fired point blank into the crowds, 31 people were killed and 150 wounded. See James B.Twitchell, *Carnival Culture* , Columbia University Press, New York. (1992) (P.28-31) and also Richard Moody, *The Astor Place Riot*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington , Indiana. (1958)(P.1-12)

³⁶ See Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. Methuen, London. 1980. (P.87-97)

and told by the players/ characters that a play would be performed, that it was beginning and that it was ending. In Renaissance theatre this direct address became conventionalised as the prologue, the induction and the epilogue. It is the explicit conventionality of Renaissance and later forms of popular theatre that allows the players to shift in and out of the frame without disrupting its integrity ; when the players call attention to the frame they do not expose an illusion, they construct a performance. ³⁷ The framing conventions developed by carnival theatre and incorporated into Renaissance theatre, pantomime, melodrama and later forms of popular drama were complex, flexible and interactive. Conversely, Naturalist theatre is unified and monistic, its conventions are designed to unite performance and narrative as a mimetic diegesis. Carnival and Renaissance theatre had neither the means nor the design to do this. Moreover the narratives of carnival and Renaissance drama were constructed from a culture of collective and un/ authorised myth, history and popular tales which negated a simple mimetic unification of performance and narrative since the narrative was always a story retold. The conventional framing of the Renaissance theatre allowed the creation of complex ironic structures of interlocking dramatic modes or planes of performance, and within and between these planes the players could shift their dramatic identity. During the narrative the actors could address the audience directly using conventional techniques, crucially the *aside* in which a character can converse privately with the audience without being heard by anyone else on stage. The aside enables a player/ character to narrate to the audience information not manifest in the action, or to make comic comments about the action or to reveal their true thoughts and emotions whilst dissembling within the narrative. To these conventionalised and authorised announcements must be added the unauthorised improvisations and interventions of the players both as performers and characters.

The Naturalist mimetic demands that the audience suspends their disbelief, their agency, their corporality and accept the drama as real. Popular theatre rather than constructing a mimetic reality negotiates its conventions to construct a complex

³⁷ Keir Elam, *Ibid.* 1980. (P.90)

multiform play of narrative, symbolism and spectacle ; disbelief is not suspended - play is engaged. Integrating elements of improvisation, myth and the anarchic subversion of the carnival, popular theatre invokes another order of reality; *the marvellous*.

The World Upside Down

With the triumph of the Puritan Parliament in 1649 popular festive culture was effectively outlawed, fairs were prohibited, the theatres and alehouses were closed, gaming and gambling were banned and even Christmas was suppressed. But rather than eliminate the popular, the puritan Protectorate drove it underground. Moreover, the revolution brought to the common people hope of a new age of liberty and equality, it turned the world upside down, it transposed and invoked the ambivalent power of the forbidden Carnival. Amongst the forces unleashed in the brief revolutionary chaos between the outbreak of the civil war and establishment of the puritan Protectorate were a cluster of proto-anarchist sects on the fringes of the puritan movement, most significantly Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers who founded utopian communes on squatted land and the Ranters who proclaimed the total subversion of feudal society and all its values.³⁸ In the Ranters' pamphlets and in the ballads and tracts of the Diggers, it is possible to glimpse the counter culture of the 17th century, the possibility of an alternative English society. As Christopher Hill observes in *The World Turned Upside Down* :

There had been moments when it seemed as though from the ferment of radical ideas a culture might emerge which would be different both from the traditional aristocratic culture and from the bourgeois culture of the Protestant ethic which replaced it. We can discern shadows of what this counter-culture might have been like. Rejecting private property for communism, religion for a rationalistic and materialistic pantheism, the mechanical philosophy for dialectical science, asceticism for unashamed enjoyment of the good things of the flesh, it might have achieved unity through a federation of communities, each based on the fullest respect for the individual. Its ideal would have been economic self-sufficiency, not world trade or world domination. The economically significant consequence of Puritan emphasis on sin was the compulsion to labour, to save, to

³⁸ See Andrew Hopton's introduction to *Digger Tracts 1649-50*, Aporia Press , London 1989. (P. 3) also Norman Cohn, *Ibid.* (P.290.)

accumulate, which contributed so much to making possible the Industrial Revolution in England. Ranters simply rejected this: Quakers ultimately came to accept it. Only Winstanley put forward an alternative. Exploitation, not labour, was the curse of fallen (i.e. covetous) man. Abolish exploitation with the wage relationship, and labour in itself, to contribute to the beauty of the commonwealth, would become a pleasure. Coolly regarded, we must agree that this was never more than a dream: the counter-acting forces in society were too strong. It came nearest to realisation in the Digger communities, which might have given the counter-culture an economic base. Their easy dispersal, and the transition from unorganised Ranter individualism to the organised Society of Friends, registers the fading of the dream into the half-light of common day.³⁹

With the establishment of the military Protectorate in 1651 the Digger communes were crushed and the key leaders and writers of the Ranter movement were arrested and forced to recant. Crucially, whilst the French Revolution established revolution as a tradition at the core of French politics, the English Revolution culminated in an infinitely flexible social compromise between the bourgeoisie and the nobility.

Ironically, although the revolutionary populism of the Diggers and the Ranters sought to overturn the feudal hierarchy it is with the *restoration* of the feudal order in 1660 that the popular culture of carnival resurfaces. With the Restoration, the State attempted to exploit popular culture as a celebration of the return of the hereditary Monarchic order; the law against theatre was abolished, music was revived in church, old festivals were restored, new festivals were established and the fairs were restored and extended. But if the popular was to be permitted, it was also to be controlled and appropriated. The Restoration court monopolised the theatre by granting Royal Patents to only two London theatre companies and increasing the legislative power of the Lord Chamberlain to censor both dramatic and printed material.⁴⁰ The Patent theatres became the only *legitimate* stages, all other theatres were forced to operate outside the law. However, by the early 18th century the power of the State to suppress the illegitimate theatres had manifestly failed and so control was revised and consolidated by the Licensing Act of 1737 which amended the laws against rogues and vagabonds, not only to eliminate the

³⁹ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex. 1993. (P.341-342.)

⁴⁰ Richard Courtney, *Outline History of British Drama* Littlefield, Adams and Company, Totowa, N.J. 1982. (P.115)

illegitimate theatres but also to censor and prohibit subversive work at the Patent theatres. 41

Yet, in spite of the Act the popular theatre found ways to abide and even vanquish suppression. The crucial loophole in the Act of 1737, and in subsequent legislation, was the supposition that theatre was essentially a spoken form. This effectively meant that to perform drama based on spoken dialogue a theatre had to be legitimate and it had to submit its playscripts to State censorship. In response to this repression the illegitimate popular theatres developed spectacular visual and musical forms which evaded prohibition and censorship by minimising spoken dialogue. This process is most discernible in the development of Pantomime in the early 18th century and in the rise of Melodrama and the Music Halls in the 19th century.

The decisive influence on the development of Pantomime was the Theatre de la Foire (*The Theatre of the Fair*) a non-speaking version of the Commedia Dell'arte which was imported from the fair booths and travelling theatres of France. 42 In the late 17th century the popularity of the Forains (*Fair actors*) provoked the French State to enact repressive legislation similar to the establishment of the English Patent Houses ; by Royal Decree the Forains were forbidden to speak. In response they resisted by devising a mimed version of the Commedia which deployed imaginative alternatives to dialogue : hand held speech banners, placards which descended from the roof and leaflets and song sheets which were handed to the audience. 43 In the early 18th century English Pantomime developed from the Theatre de la Foire as a hybrid combination of mime, music, comedy, classical allusion, pagan mythology, fairground attraction and topical satire ; a spectacle of ambivalence and allegory. As pantomime developed from the 18th to the 20th century it changed and renewed itself within a flexible but constant form. It was a collective creation ; the performers would devise their own material, the technicians would create stunts and effects in collaboration with the performers, popular songs would be integrated into the action and the narrative

41 See the *Licensing Act of 1737*, reprinted in Vincent J. Leisenfield, *The Licensing Act of 1737* University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin 1984. (P.3)

42 See Gerald Frow, "*Oh, Yes It Is!*" *A History of Pantomime*, B.B.C. London. 1985 .

43 Gerald Frow. *Ibid.* 1985. (P.34)

would be a variant of a traditional popular tale. ⁴⁴ The scriptwriter's role was essentially to integrate the diversity of performance ; the authority of the script was provisional.

In the 19th century the mute element of pantomime was phased out, classical and pagan allusion were replaced by standardised *fairy tales* and the performance of pantomime became limited to the Christmas season. But within these shifts Pantomime sustained a core of carnival ambivalence, transgression and participation. This mercurial continuity lies in the ironic nature of pantomime as both the universal ancient carnival and the local and contemporary actuality; like the theatre of the carnival, pantomime takes place between dramatic modes, the mythical past and the concrete present. This *inbetweenness* is performed most strikingly by the celebrity stars, the transvestite principal boys and dames and the humans who play animals or *skin parts*.

Melodrama

Melodrama first developed as a popular theatrical form in the illegitimate theatres, travelling companies and fairbooths of the late 18th century. Essentially it began as serious pantomime , a form of illegitimate music-drama (melo-drama) , exempt from the State prohibition on spoken dialogue. ⁴⁵ In a complex interchange between continental and British popular theatre it became by the mid 19th century the unrivalled dramatic entertainment of the English working classes. Moreover, melodrama was not only a theatrical form, it developed as a discourse between the theatre and the rapid expansion of mass popular literature in the mid 19th century. With the supercession of popular theatre by cinema in the early 20th century, melodrama became the dominant mode of popular film and subsequently television drama.

Formally theatrical melodrama combined and integrated elements of carnival

⁴⁴ Michael R.Booth , *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, Boston London and Henley.1981.(P.75.).

⁴⁵ Michael R.Booth, *English Melodrama* . Herbert Jenkins, London 1965 (P.53.)

drama (Mystery and morality plays), the pantomime and Gothic tragedy. It was a sensual entertainment, a montage of mime, music, dialogue, thrilling spectacle, amazing attractions and visceral shocks. But, melodrama also fostered the current of popular realism which runs from the grotesque realism of the carnival to the outlaw tales of the chapbooks. Combining both these aspects Melodrama is a form of fabulous materialism.

The Melodramatic narrative is driven by moral conflict at the polarities of good and evil, it is constructed from conspiracy, coincidence, plot twists, reversals of fortune, confessions, revelations, discoveries, extravagant irony, hopeless degradation, catastrophe, redemption and spectacular climaxes of justice, triumph and joy. At the core of the melodramatic narrative is the irrepressible desire for justice in the face of oppression. The moral conflict of the narrative is not played out psychologically in the development of complex personalities but takes the form of a sublime conflict between characters who embody discrete moral archetypes drawn from a traditional repertoire; the innocent heroine, the evil villain, the honest hero, the loyal friend, the fallen woman, the mute child, the comic servant etc. Initially derived from mime, the acting style of melodrama is excessive, gestural and symbolic. As in carnival drama and pantomime, the actors are not being their characters, they are playing their characters. Melodrama is not mimetic, it does not seek to fascinate an unseen audience by its verisimilitude, it is designed to produce in its audience a state of heightened affectation, to involve the participant audience in a marvellous parable.

The popular theatre of the 19th century formed a vast illegitimate industry active in all the key urban centres which had numerous extensive and prestigious theatres but at its base comprised small saloon theatres, travelling companies, fairbooth theatres and local penny theatres or penny gaffs.⁴⁶ Typically the gaffs

⁴⁶ In mid 19th century London, whilst the established theatres dominated the West End, it is estimated that more than half the theatre seats in the city were located in working class districts, and that taking into account multiple screenings, the penny gaffs had a nightly attendance of around 24,000, and this is probably an underestimation. These statistics are taken respectively from John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics*, Macmillan Press. Ltd. Hampshire.1998. (P.15) and from James Grant, *Sketches in London (1838)* quoted in Paul Sheridan, *Penny Theatres of Victorian London*. Dennis Dobson, London.1981. (P.11)

were makeshift venues improvised in disused buildings, warehouses, shacks, cellars and empty shops.⁴⁷ Although adults did attend, the overwhelming majority of the audience were working class youth. Between the early 19th century and the 1843 Theatres Act, the gaff programmes were characterised by the variety of the show, which could include a melodrama, comedy, optical illusions, dancing, ballads and pantomime accompanied by live music. The gaff melodramas were appropriated or improvised from popular novels, legitimate melodramas, Penny Dreadful serial fiction, the latest ballads and frequently from current events and spectacular crimes. The young audience would crowd the gaff in close proximity to the action and would often interact with the performance. Both at the gaffs and at the established theatres the audience was convivial and festive. In the cheap seats of the larger theatres parents would bring children and babies, bottles of drink would be passed around, food would be eaten and pipes smoked.

As an integrated narrative mode in the development of 19th century urban popular culture, the critical axis of melodrama was between the theatres and the phenomenal boom in popular literature in the first half of the 19th century.⁴⁸ The decisive innovation in 19th century popular fiction was the development of narratives written specifically to be read in regular serial instalments. Serial fiction first developed in France, but the thriving English popular magazine industry in turn developed its own characteristic fiction of melodramatic sensation, the weekly serials known as Penny Bloods. The integration of stage melodrama and penny magazine was both industrial and formal. Many popular writers wrote both fiction and melodrama, and adaptations were made both from stage to serial, and from serial to stage. Formally the most significant feature of this interaction was the theatricality of the narrative conventions and style of serial

⁴⁷ Most of the information on penny gaffs and penny Dreadfuls which follows is drawn from the excellent study by John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics*, Macmillan Press. Ltd. Hampshire. 1998.

⁴⁸ The development of cheap fiction for the working class market in the first half of the 19th century can be ascribed to a number of factors, chief amongst which were the rapid expansion of working class education, popular literacy, and the development of cheap printing and paper making technologies in the 1820s. The diversity of the unstamped and popular press of the 1830s included radical newspapers, serial fiction, free-thinking and atheist periodicals, magazines of working class 'self improvement', historical and scientific knowledge, comedy and satire, theatrical scandal sheets, sports journalism and pornography.

fiction and its woodcut illustrations. Narrative devices which had developed in the restrictions of illegitimate non-dialogue melodrama such as mute characters, animal heroes and spectacular visual events often appeared in serial fiction. Moreover, theatrical conventions appeared in the Penny Bloods transposed into literary form; the narrative would switch between a distinct series of scenes, descriptive passages read like stage directions, there would be long passages of unmediated dialogue and characters would often use rhetorical speech or dramatic monologue. ⁴⁹ A definitive formal device of stage melodrama was the tableau which conventionally occurred at the end of each act. At a moment of extreme narrative tension, moral significance or emotional affect the actors would strike and hold a group composition in which each character would be momentarily frozen in a gesture or attitude which condensed their dramatic significance into a visual icon. Penny Blood woodcuts were frequently composed as tableaux from the theatre, some even including theatrical curtains as frames or theatrical footlights running along the base of the frame. ⁵⁰ And this interaction was reciprocal since melodramas adapted from serial fiction would attempt to reproduce the illustrations of the serial fiction as theatrical tableau. In contemporary popular culture the most immediate continuity of the melodramatic tableau is the freeze frame or *stop shot* used at the end of an episode of television serial drama. This device is often counterpart to the narrative convention of ending an episode at a moment of unresolved tension: the *cliff hanger*, a device which was routinely used in stage melodrama and serial fiction.

From the 1860s onwards there developed a form of weekly penny serial magazine specifically targeted at working class youth, which was labelled by its bourgeois detractors, the Penny Dreadful. ⁵¹ The rise of the Dreadful can be attributed in part to the rapid expansion of adolescent waged labour in the mid 19th century. The Dreadfuls took up the themes and style of the earlier Bloods but also developed narratives of domestic melodrama and contemporary low life London based on the adventures of adolescent and child heroes. The Dreadful

⁴⁹ Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man*, (1963) Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex. 1974. (P.175-176).

⁵⁰ Louis James, *Ibid.* 1974. (P.172-176))

⁵¹ John Springhall, *Ibid.* 1998. (P.42)

format was not limited to Britain, there were equivalent forms in Europe, and in America the format developed as the Dime Novel. In the first half of the twentieth century the Dimes were superseded by cheap fiction magazines specialising in crime, sport, adventure and science fiction, they had glossy covers and inside pages printed on cheap wood pulp paper; pulp fiction. The hard boiled pulp prose style developed by the multiple authors of the Dime Novels and later by writers like Dashiell Hammett and David Goodis was essentially an hybrid of the melodramatic mime tradition which pared down popular narrative to plot, action and dialogue and minimised psychological exposure and interpretation, it is an *audio visual* style which parallels the development of cinematic narrative. ⁵²

The development of the popular and industrial *mass culture* of melodrama subverted and problematised the concepts of originality and authorship established in legitimate theatre and literature in the Renaissance. ⁵³ Many of the authors of serial fiction wrote anonymously and many serials had more than one author. In the absence of effective copyright law, writers, theatre companies and publishers routinely pirated and plagiarised plots, scenes or entire works from British, European and American authors. Combined with the popular theatre tradition of improvisation and audience interaction, the anonymous, collective and montaged production of 19th century melodrama effectively denied the authority of the playwright. When the standard modern academic canons of great 19th century British literature were compiled in the first half of the 20th century they listed virtually no *authors* of drama until the Naturalist *revival* of the 1890s. Consequently the most popular dramatic form in British history was Theoretically absent until the late 20th century.

Suppression, Sedation and Gentrification

From the second half of the 18th century and increasingly into the 19th century, industrialisation, urbanisation, the decline of the agrarian economy, the rise of

⁵² See John L.Fell, *Film and the Narrative Tradition*, University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma 1974.(P.37-53)

⁵³ Michael R.Booth, *English Melodrama* . Herbert Jenkins, London 1965 (P.46-51.)

evangelical Christianity and bourgeois anxiety about the unlicensed culture of the vulgar classes combined to produce a systematic onslaught of State suppression and legislation against popular culture. ⁵⁴ The new age of industry and commerce required from its workforce, order, moral discipline, thrift and sobriety. As revolution raged abroad and riot raged at home, the State sought to prevent the dangerous public gathering of the common people and to force popular culture from the streets. Regional authorities attempted to suppress unlicensed holiday pleasure fairs and wakes. Fairs which began on a Sunday or which celebrated Christian Holy days were especially censured since the mirth and drunkenness of the revellers was viewed as irreverent. In 1839 the Metropolitan Police Act prohibited many popular recreations including sledging and kite flying on the public highway, and it also granted the police increased powers to raid and close illegitimate theatres. Most of the traditional popular bloodsports were all but eliminated by genteel opposition before the 1835 Cruelty To Animals Act made them illegal. The only bloodsports which effectively survived were those in which the ruling classes participated eg.. hunting with hounds. ⁵⁵ Opposition to street football and especially to the large scale holiday games intensified, the Highways Act of 1835 made it possible to prosecute players, and many of the games which survived were prohibited and forcibly eliminated in the late 19th century. ⁵⁶ In 1855 the great and ancient London Bartholomew Fair was prohibited, and in the decade following the passing of the Fairs Act of 1871 over 700 hundred fairs and wakes were prohibited in England. ⁵⁷ In 1853 an act was passed to suppress gambling by prohibiting betting shops, but the bookies went underground and continued to operate in pubs and Music Halls. ⁵⁸ In 1868 public executions were discontinued, not because the death penalty was considered barbaric, but because the public festivity and the sale of broadside confessions, ballads, food and alcohol was considered profane and bestial, moreover, the gruesome galas disrupted working hours ; executions were continued in private.

⁵⁴ Robert Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations Under Attack* from Bennet, Martin and Waites (ed.) *Popular Culture Past and Present*, Croom Helm London.1982.. (P.20.)

⁵⁵ Robert Malcolmson. *Ibid* 1982.(P. 38 - 41).

⁵⁶ Robert Malcolmson. *Ibid* 1982.(P. 38 - 41).

⁵⁷ P. Stallybrass and A.White, *Ibid*. 1986.

⁵⁸ Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, Routledge and Kegan Paul , London 1980.(P.157).

This onslaught of litigation and genteel contempt often met with popular opposition and resistance. Like earlier suppression it did not eliminate the popular tradition, the culture simply adapted to the new conditions; State suppression was a critical determinant in the development of a hybrid industrialised urban popular culture.

The rift between popular and ruling class cultures emerged at the beginning of the 19th century complicated by the increasing commercialisation of popular culture and by the success of the commercialised popular forms in the sphere of official culture. This intensive urban commercial popular culture was integrated across its range of forms from theatre to fairbooth, circus, tavern, pleasure garden, racetrack, boxing ring, cricket field etc. It shared audiences and venues, and many of its practitioners worked across the cultural range.⁵⁹ The popular audience was not exclusively working class or urban, the significant absence was the ascendant bourgeoisie. However, as the 19th century progressed the bourgeoisie consolidated their economic and social power and began to engage in the pursuit of rational and respectable leisure. Whereas previously the disparate ruling classes had sought to simply prohibit and censor popular culture the ascendant bourgeoisie now developed a process of suppression, appropriation and gentrification which had three key strategies.⁶⁰ First, they infiltrated and colonised the elite culture of the aristocracy. Second, they developed new specifically bourgeois leisure activities such as public Art galleries, museums, promenade concerts, golf and tennis etc. And third they appropriated certain crucial popular activities, gentrified them, prevented the lower classes from taking part and finally historicized them as inventions of their own, the clearest examples of this are sporting ; cricket, rowing and athletics.⁶¹ But the appropriation of the popular wasn't restricted to sport, another critical target was theatre.

British theatre was effectively dominated for most of the 19th century by popular

⁵⁹ Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in The Industrial Revolution*, Croom Helm, London. (1980) excerpted in Bennet, Martin and Waites (ed.), *Ibid.* 1982. (P.66-67)

⁶⁰ Hugh Cunningham, *Ibid.* 1982.(P.83)

⁶¹ The institutional base for the appropriation of popular sport was education, specifically the new bourgeois public schools founded in the 1840s, where popular sports were standardised, regulated and promoted as a system of social control. See Hugh Cunningham, *Ibid* 1982. (P.73)

forms and lower class audiences, nevertheless the bourgeois State fought a ruthless war of attrition against the illegitimate theatres, especially against the unlicensed Penny Gaffs which were frequently raided by the police and the actors arrested and imprisoned. ⁶² The particular suppression of the Gaffs was motivated by successive waves of bourgeois moral panic fixed on the culture of working class youth. ⁶³ In the institutions and literature of the Victorian establishment a debate raged over the causal relationship between popular culture and juvenile delinquency. The two key terrors were the Penny Gaffs and the Penny Dreadfuls, the Gaffs were considered to be lawless dens of vice where wild young criminals could fraternise, and the outlaw narratives of the melodramas and Dreadfuls were deemed to incite and glorify criminality. Accordingly the bourgeois State embarked on the cyclical project of moral panic, legislation and repression which came to characterise its relationship with popular youth culture in the 20th century.

Meanwhile, parallel to the campaign of suppression against popular theatre the bourgeoisie developed a tradition of elite bourgeois theatre based both on the authorisation and gentrification of traditional popular drama, crucially Shakespeare, and on the constitution of a new specifically bourgeois dramatic form : Naturalism.

As the capitalist economy expanded the bourgeois State was torn between the conflicting tensions for the suppression and industrialisation of urban popular culture, between prohibition and commodification. The resolution to this conflict was a process of licensing and sedation. ⁶⁴ A critical instance of the way that this was implemented, and of the way that popular culture diverged, diversified and adapted to avoid this suppression can be found in the development of the Music Hall.

⁶² John Springhall, *Ibid.* 1998. (P.28-33)

⁶³ John Springhall, *Ibid.* 1998. (P.11-71)

⁶⁴ See Penelope Summerfield, *The Effingham Arms and the Empire: Deliberate Selection in the Evolution of the Music Hall in London* in Yeo. E. and S. (ed.), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict: 1590-1914*, Harvester Press, Sussex. 1981. (P. 209-240).

Music Hall

Tavern entertainment in the late 18th century was typically convivial, participant and amateur. In the first decades of the 19th century the number of urban pubs expanded rapidly, driven by population increase and the relative rise of working class income. In 1828 the urban pubs were brought under the provision of the Disorderly Houses Act and required to apply for a music and dancing license, in response many pubs built or adapted separate rooms or buildings as Song Saloons which could now charge an admission fee specifically for the entertainment. The Song Saloons had small stages for the performers, and tables and chairs where the audience could eat and drink, their speciality was participatory singing and most of the performers were amateurs. After years of popular protest and resistance the monopoly of the Patent Houses was broken by the Theatres Act of 1843 which granted licenses for dialogue drama to many of the larger illegitimate theatres in London. But the conditions of the licenses, which prohibited the sale of alcohol, eating or smoking, essentially forced a cultural polarisation on popular entertainment. Either the venues could go legitimate and target a polite audience, or they could renounce dialogue drama and apply for a music and dancing license. This stark choice was further enforced upon the Gaffs, Saloons and the smaller theatres by increased pressure from the police and local authorities against unlicensed venues. From the success of Saloon entertainment and the licensing enforcement of 1843, the Music Halls developed in the second half of the 19th century. ⁶⁵

From its roots as an amateur and participatory pub entertainment the Music Hall developed as essentially convivial and uninhibited; it did not restrain the life of the audience. The Music Hall programme did not require the rapt attention of a theatre narrative, since it was composed of a variety of discrete turns or acts. The basic small hall or saloon had movable seating allowing the audience mobility throughout the show. They were free to circulate and to enter or leave at any

⁶⁵ The predominate centre of Music Hall culture was the East End of London, drawing on the talent and tradition of Bartholomew Fair and the illegitimate theatres, but Lancashire was also a major centre and halls were established throughout Britain, each region developing its own characteristic forms and performers.

time, they could eat, drink and smoke whilst they watched the show, and at the back of the pit there would be a bar serving drink where they could gather to talk, or promenade. The early Music Hall performers came from the pub and saloon circuit or were former fairground, gaff or street entertainers and ballad sellers. The variety programme of the halls integrated music and theatre, fairground and circus acts, and current events, education and technological novelty.⁶⁶ The essential entertainment was the comic song with a commentary of witty patter or characterisation, but there were many types of song and many types of singer. At the core of the music hall song was the everyday life of working people: love, sex, marriage, family conflict, housing problems, poverty, politics, leisure etc. If in certain instances the subject of a song was exotic, eccentric or elite, the ironic context was always the shared experience of the audience. If a song dealt with complex or abstract issues it did so by identifying those issues with clearly defined and understood personalities. In the song the audience recognised their affinity, shared their desires and turned their trouble into pleasure. Apart from the singers there were dancers, musicians, jugglers, acrobats, magicians, ventriloquists, stand up comedians, eccentric comedians, impressionists, melodramatic and comic sketches, performing animals and a host of astounding novelty acts. The Music Hall chairman was also a performer who would mediate between the audience and the turns and provide a formal continuity to the diversity of the programme.

The legitimate theatres and the State authorities were ever vigilant against the encroachment of Music Hall into dialogue drama, performers often subverted this suppression by striking a dialogue not between actors on stage but between the lone performer and the audience. In doing this they employed the sales patter tradition of the itinerant ballad seller, the chapman and the fairground barker. Like Renaissance and popular theatre, Music Hall performance played between and across the dramatic frame constructing a complicity between audience and performer. The performers and audiences of the halls developed an exclusive popular subculture of shared experience and reference, convention, slang, gesture, accent, intonation, catch phrases, double entendre, parody, pastiche, eccentricity,

⁶⁶ Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall, Culture, Class and Conflict*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996.(P.53.)

intertextual reference and irony. ⁶⁷ This complex and subtle subculture proved very resistant to bourgeois intervention and reform. Bourgeois reformers knew that the vulgar audience found the performers amusing, and they were convinced this was because they were transgressing the moral and social order, but they couldn't prove it because they couldn't decode the culture, they didn't get the jokes. Nevertheless, as it developed in the late 19th century Music Hall became stratified by class divisions regarding both the types and locations of halls and seating and ticket prices within the halls.

In London up until the late 1880s the range of variety entertainment included pubs, saloons, minor local halls and larger halls in the West End. ⁶⁸ The establishment of the larger halls was accompanied by an institutional shift in audience targeting towards a broader class mix, decisively towards the more affluent bourgeois audience. This gentrification was accompanied by a deliberate State policy of purging and sedation, implemented by the selective refusal of licenses to the smaller halls, saloons and pubs. This sedation was reinforced by the 1878 Suitability Act which required all Music Halls to build a proscenium wall dividing the audience from the stage, to install an iron fire curtain and to remove the bar from the body of the hall. This effectively disqualified all but the large affluent halls, however it wasn't strictly applied in London until the late 1880s when the London County Council, guided by a hardheaded ideological mix of radical-liberalism, Fabianism and Temperance evangelism, implemented licensing legislation to deliberately eliminate pub and saloon Music Hall. This purge was augmented by the tendency after the 1878 Act to build and rebuild Music Halls with fixed seating, and with the cheap seats up in the gallery; effectively the new Music Halls were becoming variety theatres. As the grass roots Music Hall was suppressed the larger Music Halls formed and consolidated an industry which was eventually dominated by a few centrally controlled chains or combines. Finally, under commercial and State pressure the Music Hall industry of the turn of the century attempted to introduce self censorship to ban all politically sensitive or

⁶⁷ Dagmar Kift, *Ibid* 1996. (P.51-52.)

⁶⁸ The saloons on average would hold an audience of around 350, whilst the larger halls held thousands; the Alhambra Music Hall in Leicester Square could hold 3,500 in 1860. See Penelope Summerfield, *Ibid*. 1981.. (P.220)

vulgar material and to promote an ideology of political conservatism and nationalist jingoism.

The Music Hall made the bourgeoisie anxious because essentially they suspected that it was a front for something else, a dirty secret that was being kept from them : a temporary zone of convivial and uninhibited pleasure. To the reformers the entertainment on stage seemed to be no more than an excuse for other activities in the hall; drunkenness, prostitution, illegal betting or perhaps even political subversion. The sedation of Music Hall was a process by which audience participation and vitality was immobilised. The noisy makeshift saloons were replaced by vast and palatial Theatres of Variety, and the popular audience was banished to the cheap seats up in the distant galleries.

Consolation or Subversion ?

It has been argued by Leftist historians of popular culture that the sedation of Music Hall marked the end of the radical popular tradition and the initiation of a 'culture of consolation'.⁶⁹ The argument is that during the revolutionary years of Chartism popular culture was an integral element of radical agitation, but that in the political disillusion of the late 19th century, it became a tame depoliticised culture which consoled its working class audience with cynicism, irony, cheerful stoicism and finally reactionary nationalism. The crucial determinant in this shift would be the State licensed commodification and industrialisation of popular culture, which following capitalist (Marxist) logic would necessarily serve the interests of the bourgeoisie. In this way the 'culture of consolation' argument is a narrative which explains the origins of mass popular culture as a primary instrument of bourgeois hegemony. But this culture of consolation argument effectively denies creative agency to the participants of popular culture. Fundamentally the argument is flawed because it fails to take the irony and absurdity of Music Hall seriously, Music Hall did not console, it opened a

⁶⁹ See Penelope Summerfield, *Ibid.* 1981. and Gareth Steadman Jones, 'Working Class Culture and Working Class Politics in London, 1870-1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 7 . (Summer 1973-4)

marvellous outlaw space in the fabric of everyday life, a space which transformed boredom, poverty and injustice into subversive laughter.

Moreover, the concept of Music Hall 'depoliticisation' also depends upon the assumption that 'politics' is a specialised activity limited to the legitimate sphere of government, legislation, labour relations, international affairs etc. However, in the face of hundreds of years of repression and prohibition the continued existence of an illegitimate popular culture became in itself a political act.⁷⁰ Most of the cultural workers of Music Hall came from working class or lower middle class backgrounds, they were subject to exploitative contracts which forced them to work long hours in grim conditions, many died young or ended their lives in poverty. And yet they developed a sublime and subversive comic tradition which can be traced as a core element of 20th century British popular culture through critical figures such as Marie Lloyd, Vesta Tilley, Harry Champion, Dan Leno, Kate Karney, George Robey, Charles Coburn, Little Tich, Billy Merson, Fred Karno, Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel, Will Hay, Gracie Fields, Jessie Mathews, George Formby, the Crazy Gang, Tommy Handley, Frankie Howerd, Tony Hancock, Morecome and Wise, the Goons and many others. Further, the American Vaudeville tradition, which was essentially a variant of the Music Hall/Variety tradition, became one of the fundamental axes of Hollywood cinema providing not only key figures like Mack Sennett, Buster Keaton, W.C. Fields, Beatrice Lillie, the Marx Brothers, Bob Hope, Judy Garland and countless others, but also the Vaudeville form of variety acts montaged into a compendium feature film narrative: the comedy sketch, the dance number, the guest star spot etc.

The industrialisation of popular culture in the short term may have introduced the alienating factory system into the popular and it may have turned the audience for certain types of performance from participants to consumers, but in the long term it ensured that the popular would eventually eclipse the culture of the

⁷⁰ Notwithstanding the innate subversion of Music Hall culture, the industrialisation of the halls activated trade union militancy which led to the formation of the Variety Artists' Federation and the Music Hall strike of 1907. See Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London. 1980. (P.165-169).

bourgeoisie. Whilst the reproduction and distribution of cultural commodities has become normalised, the cultural industries have consistently failed to control the means of production : the people. The factory system and its market research division has only ever had limited success in fabricating the popular, and crucially they have historically failed to suppress fundamental popular forms and movements originating outside their professional and legitimate domain, at their most efficient they have only managed to react, market and partially appropriate popular forms such as Music Hall, Jazz, the Blues, the Counterculture, Underground Cinema, Science Fiction, Punk, Hip Hop etc. Moreover, it's not as if the industrialised sector of the popular ever was or has become the only sector. The popular is a broad and chaotic diversity of forms and participants : illegitimate, urban, rural, local, regional, temporary, underground, amateur, professional, domestic and public. Moreover, the introduction of industrial management and mass production may have been an innovation of the late 19th century, but commercialism was an integral element of the popular as far back as the booths, ballad sellers and puppet theatres of the mediaeval carnival. The myth of an organic culture exempt from economic transaction is not a tradition of popular culture. It is the bourgeois fantasy of Folklore.

The subversive carnival of popular culture winds through cultural history regenerating, transforming, mutating, diverging and combining. Its history is ambivalent, it was loathed and feared by the emergent bourgeois class who sought to suppress and control it, and yet it was also commodified and industrialised by the bourgeoisie and integrated into the mass popular culture of the 20th century. We can map its regeneration through the sensational outlaw literature of the fairs, the utopian play of Renaissance theatre, the marvellous ambivalence of pantomime, the fabulous materialism of melodrama and the convivial variety of Music Hall. It is now at the pub, the rave, the Odeon, the car boot sale, the free festival, the Blackpool illuminations, the football match, the custom car cruise, the re-enactment of the battle of Marston Moor, the bowling alley, the clubs of Ibiza, the Dr Who convention, the Exploding Cinema. This is not to mythologise the utopian power of popular culture without

acknowledging the history of popular racism, sectarianism, misogyny, homophobia, mob violence and persecution which also lies in the carnival tradition. Neither is it to disregard the hegemonic and colonial exploitation of the mass media by the state or to suggest that critical distinctions shouldn't be made between good and bad popular culture. But it is to contend that popular culture developed as an alternative tradition to the official culture of the state, that it became an unofficial utopian life of the people and that the bourgeois institution of Art constituted itself by systematically excluding it.

Chapter Two

The History of Art, the Function of the Avant-Garde and the Rise of Modernism.

As the bourgeoisie ascended to power in the late 18th and early 19th century they developed a new culture relatively autonomous to both popular culture and the official culture of the ancient feudal hierarchy : *Art*.⁷¹ This chapter will consider the historical formation of Art, the paradoxical agency of the *Avant-Garde* and the ascension of *Modernist* abstraction, the fetish of pure Art.

The contemporary meaning of Art is complex and contingent, it is specifically the traditional *visual arts* of painting and sculpture, it is a gallery/museum based cultural institution that includes a range of mediums and modes (performance Art, video Art etc.) and it is an ideal of aesthetic perfection that transcends cultural forms and institutions : classical music, legitimate theatre, poetry, literature, ballet, opera etc. This apparent diversity is unified by its exclusivity. Art excludes the popular tradition: carnival, festive ritual, working class culture, amateur culture, commercial entertainment and mass media. Moreover, the meaning of *Art* is not essential or eternal, it has radically shifted over western cultural history. As Victor Burgin notes in *The End of Art Theory* :

In classical antiquity, the word 'art' (Greek, tekne; Latin, ars) was the name given to any activity governed by rules; art was that which could be taught and as such did not include activities governed by instinct or intuition. So, for example, music and poetry were not at first numbered amongst the arts as they were considered the products of divine inspiration, beyond mortal accountability. With , however, the elaboration of a mathematics of pitch and harmony (Pythagoras), and of a poetics (Aristotle), music and poetry took their place amongst the 'arts'- alongside, for example, logic and shoemaking.
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So in ancient classical culture a definition of the *arts* would include the *sciences* of astronomy, geometry and physics. However there was a distinction between

⁷¹ This argument was principally devised as a revision of the influential essay by Peter Bürger , *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (1974) translated by Michael Shaw. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 1984..

⁷² Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory* , Macmillan, London 1986. (P.143)

manual arts and intellectual arts and this was taken up in mediaeval Europe as a distinction between the *mechanical arts* (manual crafts including painting and sculpture) and the *liberal arts* (intellectual studies such as grammar, arithmetic, astronomy, music, poetry etc.). During the Renaissance, painting and eventually sculpture were recognised as liberal arts. In the late 17th and early 18th century a new conception of science developed in the work of Galileo, Kepler, John Ray, Linnaeus, Francis Bacon and others, who began to formulate methods of experimental enquiry and proposition based on mathematical logic and a systematic observation of reality. But the development of science as an experimental method and a type of knowledge did not limit the *arts* to which science could be applied, science was the theory and *art* was the practice. The specialised definition of *Science* as the study of the *natural sciences* (physics, chemistry and biology), the exclusion of *the arts*, did not develop fully until the first half of the 19th century. Science then moved from a general meaning of *knowledge* to a specialised meaning as an experimental and theoretical method concerned with the study of specific verifiable material realities. This *Science* was applied and legitimised in the technological innovations of the industrial revolution. The emergent conception of science and the tendency to specialisation in capitalist production led to an incremental contraction of the arts as they became the seven fine arts ; architecture, dance, music, oratory, painting, poetry and sculpture. ⁷³

In mediaeval Europe the official forms of architecture, dance, music, oratory, painting, poetry and sculpture had a primarily sacred/ religious social function which in the Renaissance was superseded by a political/ courtly social function. The revolutionary accession of the bourgeoisie initiated a radical shift in the function of these arts. The development of industrial capitalism created a new consumer economy for the fine arts and so the artist became the producer of a commodity which was sold on the open market to private individuals, collectors and dealers. The established feudal economy of patronage and commission was undermined, the religious function of art was desecrated and artists were

⁷³ The fine arts were formulated as the 'beaux arts' by the Abbe Charles Batteaux in *Les Beaux Reduits a Un Meme Principe* (1747) cited by Burgin. 1986. Ibid. (P.144).

alienated from the Royal Court and the nobility. New industrial production methods threatened traditional art practice and new technologies of mechanical reproduction (photography and lithography) depreciated the authenticity and mimetic value of the arts. Concurrently the ascendant bourgeoisie was riven by conflicting impulses to suppress and sedate the vulgar popular culture of the masses and to exploit the popular with the new techniques of capitalist industry.

These factors combined in a class conflict for the control of the value of good taste. The cultural authority of the church and the nobility was displaced and Art was (re)formulated as the autonomous creation of the beautiful, the perception and study of beauty became the *aesthetic*, and the appreciation of the beautiful became a question of taste.⁷⁴ The unified *Art* that emerged in the 19th century is a product of the development of bourgeois capitalism, it is at once specialised as a visual art and universal as the bourgeois fetish of the aesthetic. There was no singular Art with a capital 'A' before the bourgeois revolution.⁷⁵ Art is the autonomous culture of the bourgeoisie and consequently there can be no Renaissance Art, primitive Art or working class Art. As Roger Taylor observes in *Art an Enemy of the People*, this is a fact that often eludes both Artists and cultural Theorists :

Art is a fetish. As this is so, so mystification becomes part of the concept of art. From outside the form of life, one can say art is nothing over and above what the bourgeoisie classifies as art, that is its meaning, but, from inside the category, such a thought is intolerable because it dismantles the beliefs that go with entering into the activities of the category.⁷⁶

The autonomisation of Art was a process in which the social function of the official feudal culture was transposed to a new bourgeois social function. The paradoxical complexity of this process is that this shift in function was initiated as a revolutionary *new* social function for the arts (Art), but consolidated as the denial of all social function. The crucible for this process was revolutionary Paris, where

⁷⁴ Peter Bürger . *Ibid* 1984. (P.46).

⁷⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords*. Fontana Press, London. 1983. (P.42) 'The emergence of an abstract, capitalised Art, with its own internal but general principles, is difficult to localise. There are several plausible C18 uses, but it was in C19 that the concept became general.'

⁷⁶ Roger Taylor, *Art, An Enemy of the People*, Harvester Press, Sussex. 1978. (P.48)

the feudal infrastructure that confined the bourgeoisie was transformed by the successive revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848. In the revolution of 1789 the break with feudalism was felt to be so absolute that the course of history was suspended and a new history begun, 1789 became the 1st Year of Liberty, the first year of progress. No longer the eternal organic cycle of harvests, generations, festivals, dynasties, death and renewal, bourgeois history became the progress of its own ascendancy, accomplished and recorded by the new technologies of capitalism. ⁷⁷ The interlocking cultural trajectories that were initiated in this shift were French Romanticism, Bohemianism and the Avant-Garde. ⁷⁸

As a concept and as a movement the Avant-Garde originated in French Utopian Socialism. ⁷⁹ The principal theorists of the movement were Henri de Saint Simon (1760-1825) and his rival Charles Fourier (1772-1837). It is from their work that many of the key concepts of Marxism and European anarcho-communism developed in the years between the fall of Napoleon and the revolutions of 1848; the decisive years of the European industrial revolution, as economic power passed from the rural landlords to the urban bourgeoisie. The idea of the Artist as vanguard first appears in a fictional dialogue between an Artist, a Scientist and an Industrialist co-written by Henri de Saint - Simon in 1825. ⁸⁰ To Saint-Simon this trinity of bourgeois professionals represents the enlightened hope of a new socialist society, and the decisive lead would be taken by the Artists. ⁸¹

⁷⁷ See Guy Debord, (1967) *The Society of the Spectacle*, Rebel Press, Aim Publications, Exeter. 1987. (Clause 140)

⁷⁸ For the Romantic character of the Avant-Garde see Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1968.(P.52)

⁷⁹ The word utopia, meaning no-where, was first composed from the Greek by Thomas Moore in his ambivalent speculation *Utopia* (1516). Utopian Socialism developed as the egalitarian gains of the Revolution were annulled, it can be traced back to the utopian tradition of the late Renaissance and the 18th century Enlightenment, from Montaigne to Rabelais, Gabriel de Foigny, Fenelon, Morelly, Diderot and Rousseau. See Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible, A History of Anarchism*, Fontana Press, London. 1993. (P.108-139)

⁸⁰ According to Donald D. Egbert, Saint-Simon's formulation of the Artist as the political vanguard predates the use of 'Avant-Garde' as a solely political term. Donald D. Egbert, *Social Radicalism and the Arts: Western Europe*, Duckworth, London.1970.(P.122)

⁸¹ 'It is we, artists, who will serve you as avant-garde: the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas;...and in that way above all we exert an electric and victorious influence. We address ourselves to the imagination and to the sentiments of mankind; we should therefore always exercise the liveliest and most decisive action; and if today our role appears nil or at very least secondary, what is lacking to the arts is that which is essential to their energy and to their success, namely, a common drive and a general idea.' Henri de Saint Simon and Leon Halevy, (1825), *Opinions Littéraires, Philosophiques et Industrielles* quoted in Donald D. Egbert, *Ibid.*1970.(P.121)

The motor of Saint-Simon's socialism was a scientific rationalism which would sweep away the mystic feudal hierarchy and inaugurate a new united European community, a golden age of prosperity and peace, a meritocracy ruled by scientists, industrialists and Artists. ⁸² Christianity would be replaced by a rational New Christianity and the priests of this new faith would be the Artists.

Like Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and his followers believed that Art had a moral and social function in the constitution of a new utopian society. Their model for the new order was a series of autonomous decentralised communes based on a mystical principle of social harmony which could be understood by the harmonic analogies of music and colour. ⁸³ The role of Art in the communes would be both integrated and vital. The influence of Utopian Socialism in the 1830s can be traced through French Romanticism and the circle of Victor Hugo to the Art for Art's Sake movement, Symbolism, William Morris, the Garden City movement and the development of Modernism and in the 20th century.

The Avant-Garde developed from the conviction that Art should have a moral and social function in the founding of a new utopian society, but this conviction must be understood as an opposition to both the feudal order and to the bourgeois economy. It is the denial of both feudal function and commercial utility, it is a demand for total autonomy which culminates in the conviction that Art should have no function other than to be Art, it should be functionless. This negation of function is the central doctrine of the Avant-Garde *Art for Art's Sake* movement of the mid 19th century and the Aesthetic movement of the late 19th century. ⁸⁴ The historical project of the Avant-Garde, as it developed through the 19th century, was the completion of the process of cultural autonomisation

⁸² See Henri de Saint Simon (1814) *The Reorganisation of the European Community*. Reprinted in Carl Cohen (ed.) F.M. Markham (trans), *Communism, Fascism and Democracy*. Random House, New York. 1962. The term 'meritocracy' was first used by Michael Young in his historical speculation *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033*, (1958), Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex. 1961.

⁸³ Donald D. Egbert, *Ibid.* 1970. (P.134)

⁸⁴ As the pioneer of 'l'art pour l'art', the poet and novelist Théophile Gautier pronounced in 1834: 'What is really beautiful can be no other than good for nothing; anything that is useful is ugly because it expresses some need, and those of man are base and disgusting, like his wretched and invalid nature. The most useful part of a house is its latrines...I am one of those to whom the superfluous is necessary, and I like things and people in inverse proportion to the services they render.' Théophile Gautier, (1834), *Mademoiselle de Maupin* quoted in Jean Gimpel, *Against Art and Artists*. 1991. Polygon, Edinburgh. (P.P.93).

initiated in the bourgeois revolution; the Avant-Garde is the movement which pioneers, implements and maintains the autonomy of bourgeois Art. But the autonomous Art developed by the bourgeoisie and pioneered by the Avant-Garde was not functionless. It progressively rendered its social utility and necessity illegible but this was not an absence of function, it was a new function: its function was to be superfluous.

The development of bourgeois capitalism and the accession of the bourgeoisie as the ruling class radically transformed the feudal culture of the Church and nobility, however it did not replace it. Art was not the advent of a revolutionary new capitalist culture, it was the appropriation and fetishisation of the feudal arts and their sacred and noble function by a new ruling class. As Taylor notes:

The revolutionary class, through whose activity came about the normalisation of bourgeois social relations (eg. wage labour, the labour market, the ownership of the means of production) and which contains persons having status on the basis of the older feudal set up, in its aspiration to be the ruling class has the aspiration to take over the life of the ruling class. ⁸⁵

The bourgeoisie were brought to power by industrial innovation, and yet they desired the honour and consecration of feudal rule, and so, paradoxically, Art became the fetishised ideal of pre-industrial production ⁸⁶. Consequently, the fragmentation of the assembly line, the alienation of the worker from the product of their labour, standardisation, automation and the other key innovations of bourgeois capitalism could not be adopted for the production of Art. ⁸⁷ The autonomisation of Art is a process of detachment from mass industrial production, to the point where Art is defined by its unique authenticity, by its manual creation. In his celebrated 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin proposes that the authenticity of an Art object, its unique material history, the viewer's perception of their *distance* from the work, could be termed the *aura* of a work. ⁸⁸ Benjamin locates the origin of the

⁸⁵ Taylor. Ibid. 1978.(P.43)

⁸⁶ For example the *Gothic Revival*, *Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement* etc.

⁸⁷ Bürger. Ibid.1984.(P.36)

⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', from *Illuminations*, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow. 1979.(P.223)

aura in the sacred function of Art:

We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote is still recognisable as secularised ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty.⁸⁹

For Benjamin lithography, photography, cinema and the other techniques of mechanical reproduction had the potential to destroy the aura of Art and liberate humanity from the oppression of ritual and history. Mechanical reproduction could make Art accessible to the masses, and penetrate and reveal a demystified modern reality.

Benjamin's prose is exhilarating but he is betrayed by a fatal misconception of Art and by the resiliency and immunity of bourgeois culture to subversion. As the bourgeoisie assumed economic power they developed a commercial market for the sacred and aristocratic arts of the ruling class. But mechanical reproduction could not satisfy the demand of the Art market, because the commodity sought by the bourgeoisie is aura. Mechanical reproduction has obviously transformed 20th century culture, but it has not destroyed the aura of the work of Art, because Art was constituted as that which is not mechanically reproducible.⁹⁰ There can be no aura until the development of mechanical reproduction, aura is the value of Art. This paradox has several irresistible consequences. Since the production of aura is the production of the pre-industrial sacred and aristocratic function of the arts the production process cannot be industrialised. So, whilst the progress of capitalism transformed the social relations and industrial techniques of modern

⁸⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Ibid.* 1979.(P.225-226)

⁹⁰ Even Benjamin, in his notes at the end of the essay, acknowledges that without mechanical reproduction authenticity cannot become fetishised as the aura. 'Precisely because authenticity is not reproducible, the intensive penetration of certain (mechanical) processes of reproduction was instrumental in differentiating and grading authenticity. To develop such differentiations was an important function of the trade in the work of art.' Benjamin. *Ibid* 1979.(P.245)

culture, Art has remained an autonomous realm of elitism and ritual.⁹¹ The ever increasing sophistication and efficiency of mechanical reproduction has not eliminated the aura, it has valorised an auratic hierarchy, at the top of which is the *real* unique authentic *work* of Art, and below is an ever descending scale of copies each of which has diminishing economic (auratic) value according to its historical and material distance from the original. Above all the hierarchy of aura has eternalised Art (painting and sculpture) as the paragon of unique authentic objects, for they cannot be reproduced and even to attempt to do so is a crime; forgery. The absence of a unique and authorised object was a crucial factor in the strategies deployed in the development of film and video Art ; against the ephemeral, sensual and collective experience of popular cinema, Avant-Garde film and video makers have sought to materialise and objectify the cinematic : selling *limited edition film prints*, fetishising unique conditions of exhibition, incorporating film and video into sculpture/installations etc.

The revolutions which brought the bourgeoisie to power were revolutions against the divine authority of the Church and the aristocracy, moreover the scientific rationalism of the 19th century increasingly revealed the irrationality of both the Christian god and the hereditary power of the nobility. The bourgeoisie adopted the revolutionary demands for democracy and equality in their rise to power, but these demands if taken to their logical conclusion threatened the fundamental ideological legitimacy of social class, without which the bourgeoisie had no right to rule. And so, as it acquired power, the bourgeoisie had to develop the means to legitimise that power. This was the problem addressed by Saint-Simon; Who were to be the lords and the priests of the new society ? What was to be the new religion ? Who would lead the way ? It was to be Art. Since the social hierarchy of the West had been structured by God and nobility for nearly two thousand years,

⁹¹ John Ruskin , the Victorian pioneer of modern Art theory, recognised and celebrated the cult of the aura in his lecture of 1859 *The Unity of Art*. Ruskin constructs a hierarchy of human production; 'Manufacture' is production without intelligence, 'Art' is production with intelligence but 'Fine Art' is the combination of '....the hand, the head and the heart...' , (Fine) Art can only be handmade : ' Whatever changes may be made in the customs of society, whatever new machines we may invent, whatever new manufactures we may supply, Fine Art must remain what it was two thousand years ago, in the days of Phidias; two thousand years hence, it will be, in all its principles, and all its great effects upon the mind of man, just the same. John Ruskin, *The Unity of Art*, from *Sesame & Lilies, The Two Paths & The King of the Golden River* , J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd London & Toronto (1907) (P.120)

and since the bourgeoisie actually aspired to this feudal hierarchy, so bourgeois Art syncretised the hierarchical aristocratic and sacred *function* of the arts into the capitalist economy. The aura as commodity is the desire of the bourgeois for aristocratic and theocratic power but it is also their fear that they will never possess it. In the presence of the aura the bourgeois contemplates in awe the traditions of divine and hereditary authority. Democracy and equality are antithetical to Art; the value of aura is its scarcity.

The auratic value of ancient *art* works which actually once had a sacred or courtly function is prodigious, but for the bourgeois, also tainted by their very functionality. The bourgeois Artist of the 20th century removed the taint of function, they discovered how to produce pure aura. The shift from sacred to courtly and finally to bourgeois Art is a shift from a collective to a private experience ⁹². With the rise of capitalism the traditional social relations of feudalism became irrelevant to the bourgeoisie, the anonymity of the market and the development of waged labour no longer required the cohesive social function of the arts, the bourgeoisie no longer required or desired social contact with the lower classes ; for the late 19th century bourgeoisie the working class districts of London were a dreadful and alien abyss. The bourgeois revolutions culminated in an Art of individualism and privacy which operated in both the production and reception of the work of Art. In production this shift begins during the Renaissance, first with the decline of the mediaeval craft guilds and the collective workshop, and second with the origin of the concept of the *genius*. In reception this process can be discerned in the rise of Art forms which isolated the audience as individuals (the novel, Naturalism) , and also in the commodification of the aura.

Before the development of the aura of Art, the Sacred and Courtly artwork had a *prestige* generated by its social function; the sacred word, the image of God, the King's estate, the music for the pageant...etc. Prestige emanated not from the artwork itself nor from the maker but from the feudal hierarchy of God and

⁹² Bürger. Ibid.1984.(P.48)

nobility. To use the semiotic model, the prestige of a feudal artwork was the signified not the signifier. Moreover, before the Renaissance art was the work of God and the artist was simply a medium for God's divine creation; it is only with the advent of Renaissance humanism that the work of art begins to become the expression of an individual mortal. ⁹³ The function of Courtly art was to represent the glory of the monarch, the nobility and the reign of the court. This prestige emanated from the monarchy and the nobility who also legitimised their authority in the name of God. And so in both Sacred and Courtly art, prestige is a function of the artwork, in that it is the distance of the viewer from sacred and noble authority. It locates the viewer in the great cosmic feudal hierarchy which begins at its highest with God and then descends by degree through every angel, every human from King to serf, every beast, herb, mineral and finally to the basest elements of existence. With the development of Art, the prestige of Sacred and Courtly art becomes autonomous, it becomes aura; prestige without *function*. In the presence of *great* Art the modern bourgeoisie are alone, they experience the aura as a fascinating nostalgia, an ineffable exaltation and desire: exaltation that they are at last in the presence of noble and sacred power, and desire for the lost prestige of that power, the prestige which they have commodified. For this reason the Art gallery has become both the Church and Palace of the aura, and this is also a fundamental reason why Art eventually divested itself of even the function of representation. ⁹⁴

It is an established doctrine of Art Theory, that *non-representational* Art is a defining development of the Avant-Garde and that the Avant-Garde is a defining tendency of Modernism. In semiotic terms, Modernism can be defined as the movement that pursues the rift between signifier and signified which was revealed by the experiments of Cubism. ⁹⁵ Before Cubism, Realist Art was primarily concerned with the representational dynamics between signified and reference. Cubism shifts this concern to the dynamic between the signifier and the

⁹³ See Burgin .Ibid. 1986.(P.154) and also Arnold Hauser, Ibid.Vol.2, 1968.(P.70)

⁹⁴ See Bürger. Ibid. 1984. (P.48)

⁹⁵ This semiotic interpretation of the Modernist 'breakthrough' is taken from Peter Wollen's celebrated essay on Avant-Garde cinema *The Two Avant-Gardes*, which I will be considering in detail towards the end of this text. See Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes' in *Studio International* (Nov./Dec. 1975) (p.172.)

signified, and this shift ultimately facilitates the suppression of the signified, and leads to an Art of pure signifiers : *the autonomisation of the content of Art* ⁹⁶. If the Avant-Garde is the vanguard of autonomous bourgeois Art, so Modernism is the movement that sought to consummate the Avant-Garde by materialising the autonomy of Art as the content of Art. This trajectory can be traced from the rise of bourgeois Art to its first theoretical articulation, in the Art for Art Sake movement, as a denial of reference which permits the semiotic shift of Cubism. Modernism is the Art of the Abstract, the Non-Objective, the Non-Representational and the Non-Narrative. The Modernist Artist eliminates representation and decoration , and seeks purity of form and material. ⁹⁷. This compulsion is driven by the fetish of the aura, for as mechanical reproduction becomes ever more mimetically efficient, so aura as a commodity becomes ever more specialised as that which cannot be mechanically reproduced; throughout the 19th century new industrial techniques of fabrication undermined Art's function as the producer of beautiful objects whilst photography eroded Art as the representation of the real. Inevitably the only thing that cannot be mechanically reproduced is aura itself : pure, abstract, superfluous and insignificant. ⁹⁸ The elimination of representation is a *breakthrough* in the development of the aesthetic, it is pure aura, the fetish of Sacred and Courtly authority in its ideal state, beauty without function, insignificant. And this is its function , for this autonomous Art can only be appreciated by an autonomous social elite. ⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Wollen . Ibid. 1975. (P.172)

⁹⁷ See for instance the influential study by Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1936). Penguin Books Ltd. Harmondsworth, Middlesex.1974.

⁹⁸ The search for pure aura was explicit in the work of a faction of the leading pioneers of abstract Art who were influenced by occult philosophy, notably Mondrian and Kandinsky. Kandinsky was fascinated by the occult concept of spiritual aura and collected and studied photographs which appeared to reveal aura, ectoplasm and phantom images. For the search for aura in abstract film see William Moritz, *Abstract Film and Colour Music* in Edward Weisberger, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Los Angeles County museum of Art, Abbeville Press, New York 1986.(P.297-311).

⁹⁹ '....Never perhaps has more been asked of the spectator, who is now required to 're-produce' the primary operation whereby the artist (with the complexity of his whole intellectual field) produced this new fetish. But never perhaps has he been given so much in return. The naive exhibitionism of 'conspicuous consumption', which seeks distinction in the crude display of ill-mastered luxury, is nothing compared to the unique capacity of the pure gaze, a quasi-creative power which sets the aesthete apart from the common herd by a radical difference which seems to be inscribed in 'persons'. Pierre Bourdieu, (1979) , *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. London. 1986.. (P.4)

The *function* of the superfluousness of autonomous bourgeois Art is to articulate the social hierarchy of bourgeois capitalism. Art demonstrates to society that the bourgeoisie now has sacred and noble authority, but to gain this authority the bourgeoisie has abstracted it from its tradition, its function, they have commodified the aura and they have developed a realm of beauty free from human need. This freedom, this life of ease, has become the aesthetic of Art.¹⁰⁰ The historical autonomisation of Art is a component of the autonomisation of the bourgeois class; the exclusion of necessity, the exclusion of vulgar emotional and sensual pleasure, is also the exclusion of those who are chained to necessity, those who display vulgar emotion and sensual pleasure. The nascent bourgeois conception of the body, the Classical body, is a body sealed and finished, without growth or death. It is a body without functions, without process, alone. As the bourgeois class liberated itself from the subjection of feudalism, it liberated itself from the base needs and excretions of the body. But the crude and toxic industrial processes which generated the wealth of the bourgeois class turned the cities of the 19th century into dark and savage reservoirs of disease and effluent. The very source of their liberation pushed the bourgeoisie ever deeper into privacy, into autonomy, into alienation from the vulgarity of the body, from emotion, from the common people, from the urban squalor of the industrial city, from the source of their own wealth. This alienation is the freedom of the bourgeoisie and it is reproduced in Art as the distance of the aesthetic gaze ; it transcends the base and carnal pleasures of the body, the vulgar entertainments of the masses, the recklessness of political action, the vulnerability of emotion. In the silent gallery the viewer is never lost, but remains amused with their own perception. Impartiality fixes the superiority of the bourgeois as those who have risen *above* not only the animal passions of the lower classes but also the superstition of Christianity and the primitive bloodline of the aristocracy. This ascendance is reified in Modernism; function, significance and affection are all purged, the autonomy of Art becomes both the form and content of the Artwork ; pure aura. Which of course is the terrible irony of Modernism,, because the Avant-Garde is not the spearhead of a radical new future, it is the means by which the bourgeoisie

¹⁰⁰ See Bourdieu. Ibid. 1986 (P.31-32.)

perpetuate the ancient social hierarchy of feudalism. And Modernism is not *modern* socially, technologically or industrially, it is the survival of a feudal handicraft into the age of mechanical reproduction. This is the paradox of autonomisation as a process which eliminates *the human* from the work of Art, for as the human is refused as content, so it becomes the guarantee of aura, as mechanical reproduction becomes ever more efficient so what cannot be reproduced becomes ever more fetishised, which is to say that the humanity of the Artist becomes fetishised as the referent of the aura.

As the arts became increasingly industrialised and commodified so the artist was thrown into a crisis of function which is the essential state of the modern Artist, caught in an anachronism, a Romantic rejection of both the feudal and the bourgeois.¹⁰¹ Romanticism is the end of feudal prestige and the initiation of the aura. Without the prestige of function the aura of bourgeois Art had no signified. Since more than a thousand years of sacred and noble art function could not be eliminated in a revolution, the prestige of art was transferred to the alienated Artist genius who became the signified of the aura: noble, sacred, the priest, the King, the saint, the prophet, the witch, the Count, the Princess, the devil, the martyr, the messiah, the god. The autonomisation of Art traps the Artist in a vestigial feudal ritual, for since aura can only emanate from the divine hierarchy of Christ and his chosen nobility so the Artist must shun *trade* as a proof of their sacred and noble caste. Aura as a commodity can be bought and sold on the capitalist market, but the Artist can never enter capitalist industry, to do so would be to lose the gift of aura, to become a designer, a copywriter, an illustrator ...to become an employee. Romanticism opposed capitalism, but this opposition was based on an idealised organic feudalism, a return to a pre-capitalist realm of nature, chivalry and spirituality ¹⁰². The Avant-Garde as vanguard of Art has pioneered this feudalisation, from the mediaeval fantasies of William Morris and the mysticism of the Symbolists to the stigmata and self immolation of Orlan, Franko B. and Stelarc. The Artist becomes for the bourgeois viewer bearer of all

¹⁰¹ Hobsbawm. E.J. , *The Age of Revolution*, Weidenfield and Nicholson Ltd, London 1973.(P.312-333)

¹⁰² See Burgin. *Ibid.* 1986.(P.188)

sublimated passion, myth and romance. In return they are allowed the freedom of the Year King, the Lord, the human sacrifice, the shamen, the drunk, the taker of drugs, the fool, the over reacher, the prophet, the promiscuous, the impotent. This is why the bourgeois public is fascinated with Artist martyrs like Van Gogh, Egon Schiele, Gwen John, Pollock, Kahlo, Rothko and Basquiat. The work of the Artist martyr is a reliquary, they have become immortal in the new bourgeois chronology. The Artist carries the feudal past out of cyclical time into progress, they have been Romanticised, they produce aura by repeating the myth of the alienated Messiah King endlessly but always new.

The pure gaze of the bourgeoisie is disinterested, Art turns loneliness, despair, horror and madness into beauty. As capitalism has specialised labour, the Artists have become specialised as those who are allowed to express alienation on the condition that it is superfluous. Moreover it has been those Artists who expressed their alienation most originally and radically who have pioneered new types of irrelevance.

The *function* of the Avant-Garde, as the vanguard of autonomous bourgeois Art, is to ensure that all cultural products that penetrate the realm of the bourgeoisie are rendered superfluous.

Chapter Three

Folklore vs. Kitsch : How Art Theorised Against the Popular.

As you now know, the bourgeois institution of Art constituted itself by systematically excluding popular culture; Art became the legitimate culture of the bourgeois State and popular culture became the illegitimate non-Art. Whereas modern popular culture developed as a chaotic interaction of festive ritual, commerce, technology, prohibition and resistance, producing diverse and divergent cultural forms, the autonomisation of Art was an historical process of eliminating, limiting or controlling all interaction that threatened the bourgeoisie fetishisation of feudal power. Art was initiated as a function of bourgeois society and yet the process of fetishisation in its constitution produced fundamental constraints to its development as the dominant legitimate culture of industrial capitalism. Whilst bourgeois entrepreneurs found they could apply their revolutionary industrial techniques to commodify and mass produce popular cultural forms, they also discovered that applying industrial techniques to Art depreciated the aura they coveted ; Art had to be maintained as an elite pre-industrial handicraft. Consequently, by the late 19th century the authority of Art was being challenged by a mass produced popular culture driven by technological progress, free market competition and democratic social reform. A history of modern Art can be mapped by the aesthetic, ideological and institutional strategies deployed to negate this threat. A crucial and integrated element of this negation was the development of theories of culture which sought to historicize, rationalise and maintain the legitimacy of Art and the rift between Art and the popular. This chapter will consider the formative phase of these theories on the understanding that they will later be tracked and contextualised into the development of academic film and cultural Theory.

Throughout the 20th century the study of popular culture has been conceptually fragmented by categories and typologies that have prevented and distorted recognition of its continuous, contiguous and integrated tradition : Myth, Custom,

Folklore, Folk Art, the Little Tradition, Popular Art, Commercial Art, Craft, Kitsch, Mass Media, Amateurism, Art Brut, Outsider Art, Youth Culture, Subculture, Fan Culture etc. On the contrary, this fragmentation is not a characteristic of Art, which is defined as eternal and unified, transcending all mediums, ethnicities and histories. The reason for this discrepancy is that the history of the academic study of popular culture is a bourgeois history ; it was written by an autonomous ruling class observing the alien culture of its subjects. Which is not to deny that popular culture is diverse, provisional and ephemeral, but it is to contend that the academic study of popular culture developed from a perception of the popular as an irrational, incoherent and alien wilderness to be mapped and made reasonable; the purpose of Art for the bourgeoisie is to identify their culture as the apex of a hierarchy which descends through grades of taste into the vulgar and the incoherent. Whilst some radical writers of contemporary Cultural Studies are currently challenging the fragmentation of the study of the popular there remains a fundamental legacy of separation which is articulated within Theory as divisions into various critical typologies and academic disciplines according to perceptions of formal, technological, vocational and historical specificity.¹⁰³ A key historical fragmentation in the study of film has been between the study of theatre/ drama and cinema/ film and, as we shall soon discover, this has led to many irrational anomalies. But the fundamental rift in the historical constitution of the academic study of popular culture, the Theory industry and the Independent Film and Video sector of the 1970s, is the development of a Theoretical practice which is institutionally extraneous and frequently hostile to popular practice ; it divides the audience from the academy, education from industry and vocational/ professional sectors from theoretical/ research sectors. This crucial and complex division is structured by the Art/ Non-Art model, popular practice is illegitimate non-Art whilst the study of popular culture is a function of legitimate bourgeois culture. A crucial strategy of my praxis is the refusal and transgression of this separation.

The development of the Art/ non-Art binary can be tracked through a series of

¹⁰³ A recent comprehensive and engaging attempt to unravel the Theoretical fragmentation of popular culture and to map the historical continuities from carnival to contemporary pop culture is : John Docker , *Postmodernism and Popular Culture, A Cultural History* (1994), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1996. (P.192-197).

emblematic theoretical models. One of the earliest and most influential foundations for the system was devised even while Art was consolidating its realm; it is the work of the Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold. ¹⁰⁴ In his *Culture and Anarchy* of 1869 Arnold (re)defined the nature and purpose of *culture* in response to the Chartist demonstrations and radical working class protest of the preceding years. According to Arnold *culture* is the study of perfection motivated by the social and moral passion for doing good. ¹⁰⁵ It is the best that mankind has produced and its function is to perfect the beauty and intelligence of both the individual and humanity ; to bring sweetness and light. Culture is not political or subjective, it is disinterested, harmonious, true and right, it is the will of God. Moreover, culture is the only defence against social anarchy and so it must be cultivated and disseminated by the democratic State. Arnold's definition of culture implicitly and at times explicitly depends upon a concept of a relative non-culture: *culture is Art*.

Forty years later the influential Art critic Roger Fry integrated the Arnoldian concept of culture into his Avant-Garde manifesto *Art and Socialism* (1912). Fry was a member of the Bloomsbury Group, a disciple of William Morris and the founder of the crafts production firm the Omega Workshops. ¹⁰⁶ He believed modern life was poisoned by a vulgar commercial pseudo-Art which functioned primarily to symbolise social distinction. Ordinary people had their emotional life drugged by this fake culture and were incapable of seeing beyond its symbolic surface. The Artist is a prophet and priest, the articulate soul of mankind. It is the Artist who penetrates the sham world and directly apprehends the real; the revelation of ultimate value. Accordingly, the Artist cannot be bound by conventional labour relations and must be free from all restraint. Neither capitalism or bureaucratic socialism can liberate Art, the future of Art lies in a society based on the return of manual craft.

¹⁰⁴ Arnold was the son of the influential headmaster of Rugby public school, Dr. Thomas Arnold. He served as an Inspector of Schools and later held the Chair of Poetry at Oxford University (1857-67).

¹⁰⁵ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) from *Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose* (ed. P.J.Keating), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex. 1970.(P.205).

¹⁰⁶ Roger Fry, *Art and Socialism* (1912) reprinted with alterations in *Roger Fry, Vision and Design* (1920) Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex. 1961.(P.51-69)

In the 1930s Arnold's conception of culture was deployed in the highly influential work of the literary critic Frank Raymond Leavis, his wife Queenie Leavis and their collaborators on the Cambridge University based journal of literary criticism *Scrutiny* (Founded 1932) .¹⁰⁷ Leavis promoted the study of English literature as vital to the social, moral and spiritual life and future of the nation. His critical method was based on the intensive and detailed reading of texts. He rejected theoretical analysis and advocated the personal, vital, intuitive and emotional response of the reader / critic to the text. The ethical value of literature was its capacity to promote the creative, intellectual and emotional growth of the individual. Great literature was defined as that which had a vital and direct relationship with the objective world.¹⁰⁸ But, Leavis and his Scrutineers believed that literature was in crisis, it was under attack from all sides by the vulgar mindless pulp and trash of a mass industrial culture which was perverting and dehumanising everyday life.¹⁰⁹ At the core of this belief was a nostalgia for a mythical pre-industrial *folk culture*, a rural organic community before industry, class and alienated labour. Leavis' solution to the crisis of taste was, as was Arnold's, a programme of national cultural renewal through education. The defining ideological and institutional core of the Leavisite cultural project was the academic study of literature ; if the mass culture of cinema, advertising and popular fiction was an abnormal form of 'substitute living' and 'decreation' then the study of literature was the hope of a national culture, of tradition, recreation and taste. Through the pages of *Scrutiny* and numerous pamphlets and books, Leavis and his collaborators influenced and inspired a generation of critics, teachers and educationalists, amongst them Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, the pioneers of what would become the academic discipline Cultural Studies.

Meanwhile, in America, Clement Greenburg formulated perhaps the most

¹⁰⁷ See Iain Wright, F.R.Leavis, *The Scrutiny Movement and the Crisis*, in J.Clark, M Heinemann, D.Margolies and C.Snee (eds.), *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 1930s*, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1979.. (P. 37-67)

¹⁰⁸ See Pamela McCallum, *Literature and Method: Towards a Critique of I.A.Richards, T.S.Eliot and F.R. Leavis*, Gill and Macmillan, Humanities Press, Dublin. 1983.(P.178-203.)

¹⁰⁹ F.R.Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (1933) Chatto and Windus, London. 1962. (P. 96-97).

celebrated and explicit model for the Art/Non Art binary in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* published in the Trotskyist Partisan Review in 1939. ¹¹⁰ *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* consolidates the integration of Arnold's concept of *culture* and the Avant-Garde developed by Fry. Greenburg divides culture into two opposing factions : the Avant-Garde which struggles to maintain and develop the tradition of Art, and *Kitsch* the mass commercial popular culture which is a parasitic and fake pseudo-Art. According to Greenburg, *Kitsch* was initiated by the industrial revolution which produced a new urban working class alienated from their traditional folk culture. As the working class became literate and relatively affluent they constituted a market for culture and yet they failed to acquire taste. To supply the working class demand for culture, capitalism produced the commodity *Kitsch*. What is most innovative in Greenburg's model is the equation of Art and the Avant-Garde with Modernist abstraction and the condemnation of *Kitsch* as realist and narrative ; Art is formal, it requires effort to appreciate, it is concerned with cause, whilst *Kitsch* is prefabricated, unequivocal and concerned with effect. This opposition was effectively reproduced in the 1970s as the radical project of British Avant-Garde film.

A formative influence on Greenburg's essay were ideas developed in German Marxist criticism. However, the classic Marxist attack on popular culture was written in New York a decade later by the German critics of the exiled Frankfurt School: *The Culture Industry : Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1947) by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. ¹¹¹ This compelling denunciation compounds the Art/non-Art binary with Marxist dialectics and elementary Freud to construct a model which anticipates not only the Situationists, British Cultural Studies and the film Theory of the 1970s but also contemporary Postmodern Theory. For Adorno and Horkheimer commercial popular culture is an industry which rather than manufacturing commodities actually produces the *subjectivity* of its consumers.

¹¹⁰ Clement Greenburg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review*. VI. No.5. New York Fall 1939.(P.34-39). compiled in C. Harrison and P.Wood (Eds.), *Art in Theory*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford. 1992.(P.529-541).

¹¹¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Culture Industry : Enlightenment As Mass Deception* extracted from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) trans. John Cumming. The Seabury Press, New York (1972) compiled in *The Cultural Studies Reader* ed. Simon During. Routledge, London and New York. (1993).(P.29-43).

Art is passionate, serious and transcendent. Mass culture is standardised and industrial, it is a non culture which negates thought and maintains an obedient working class. It promises freedom in order to enslave, it unifies the worker into the industrial production of life.

The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. The old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left (because the latter is intent upon reproducing the world of everyday perceptions), is now the producer's guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen. This purpose has been furthered by mechanical reproduction since the lightning takeover by the sound film. Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies. ¹¹²

Further, since popular cinema has eroded the difference between illusion and real life, the divided subjects of bourgeois society no longer struggle for individuality, instead they merely simulate ; the culture industry commodifies life and it is irresistible.

In the 1970s the concept of popular cinema as a repressive industrial apparatus for the construction of alienated subjects became the legitimising logic for both radical Film Theory and the Independent film and video sector. Drawing from the work of the Frankfurt School, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, popular cinema was conceived as a crucial agent in the construction and maintenance of bourgeois ideological *hegemony* , and a core project of both Theory and Independent film making became the *demystification* of hegemonic texts. We'll return to demystification at the end of this text, first we must get to grips with the difference between *Folklore* and popular culture.

The significance of the cultural category Folklore in the context of experimental cinema is its *potential* as a third culture, alternative to both Art and the popular tradition. The Art/non-Art hierarchy as it appears in the work of Fry, Leavis, Greenburg, and Adorno and Horkheimer is predicated on the annihilation of a mythic pre-industrial organic folk culture by the coming of a repressive mass

¹¹² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Ibid.* (1993).(P.33-34)

industrial and commercial popular culture. And this assumption was also crucial to the formation of British Cultural Studies in the mid 1960s. However, in the 1970s a group of radical social historians began to challenge the theoretical foundations of Folklore and this historical revision was consolidated in the mid 1990s by Ronald Hutton . 113

In a series of interconnected works Hutton systematically recontextualised the history of the British ritual year; the calendar of Folklore, festivals and rites from Christmas through Easter, the May, Corpus Christi, Harvest Home, Halloween to Guy Fawkes night. Although scholars of the aristocracy and the emergent bourgeoisie had studied and anthologised popular cultural forms since the 18th century the term *folk-lore* was first introduced into the British academic lexicon in the mid 19th century. 114 The Folklore movement which developed in the late 19th/ early 20th century was ideologically dominated by the work of an elite group of bourgeois intellectuals 115 The ideological underpinning of Folklore was pagan survivalism. This arcane and attractive concept interpreted the popular rites and festivals of Britain as direct survivals of ancient prehistoric pre-Christian pagan rituals which had persisted over thousands of years, hidden away in the timeless rural wilds and deep forests of England. Inspired by the scientific logic of evolutionism the Folklore movement conceived popular festivals as social fossils. 116 So pervasive was this doctrine throughout the 20th century that it is still widely accepted and propagated by many enthusiasts and even by participants in many of the popular rituals. But in the late 1960s cultural historians began to question the fundamental assumptions of survivalism basing their work on exhaustive research of primary historical records. This revision is consolidated by Hutton in

113 Notably E.P. Thomson, Robert Malcolmson and Peter Burke. See Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1994.. and Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1996..

114 The term was first introduced by the writer and editor W.J. Thoms as part of a wider trend of Anglo-Saxon semantic revivalism. Thoms became a director of the Folk-Lore Society in 1878. The term Folk Song dates from around the 1870s. See Williams *Ibid.* 1983. (P.136)

115 Notably James Frazer author of the highly influential *The Golden Bough* (pub. 1890 - 1915), Sir Edmund Chambers, Charlotte Burne, Margaret Murray, Violet Alford, Mary Macleod Banks and Cecil Sharp. Hutton, *Ibid.* 1996. (Ch. 40. P.408-427)

116 Hutton, *Ibid.* 1996.(P.299)

great depth, for our purposes it is only necessary to summarise certain critical points.

To begin with, apart from three specific instances there is actually no historical evidence that any English popular rites or festive rituals are ancient survivals.¹¹⁷ In fact the history of festive ritual is not a gradual and inevitable linear decline from the ancient sacred but a dynamic process of diverse local creation, renewal and reinvention by the common people. Rather than an inexorable recession from the sacred, the festive tradition has historically waxed and waned. Hutton asserts that far from declining in the late mediaeval period, festive ritual actually diversified and expanded. If the origins of many festive rituals were not ancient and sacred then neither were their functions, Hutton documents the historical development of a complex economy of festive fundraising both as a means of raising funds for the local community and as a form of ritualised begging employed by common people in times of unemployment and hardship. The final crucial point is that the tradition of festive ritual cannot be defined as essentially rural since many of the key features of the ritual year developed in urban centres. Festive ritual is not a survival half remembered and eternally repeated, it is a primary element of a popular culture which is constantly and actively renewed and transformed by the people. The meaning of festive ritual cannot be discovered in a search for origins, it must be grasped in the context of its contemporary celebration. The 19th century narrative of a pre-Christian paganism replaced by the coming of Christianity conceals the essential continuity of the mercurial popular tradition.

The reasons why the bourgeois Folklorists of the 19th century propagated the doctrine of pagan survivalism are complex and contradictory. The concept of a secret pagan faith abiding in the hidden forests of Albion is essentially a strand of mystical utopian and arcadian Romanticism, whilst the concept of social fossilisation invokes the authority of scientific rationalism. This Enlightenment

¹¹⁷ The instances are Christmas presents, decking sacred sites with greenery and midsummer bonfires. Hutton, *Ibid.* 1994.(P.50-51)

paradox can be understood if we consider the development of the egalitarianism of the French Revolution.

In the years leading up to the Revolution of 1789 radical French Enlightenment intellectuals such as Meslier, Morelly, Diderot and Rousseau developed a concept of human equality as a state of nature.¹¹⁸ During the revolutionary period this egalitarianism was developed and applied by a group of eminent philosophes who were forerunners of both Anthropology and the academic study of popular culture.¹¹⁹ This egalitarianism was a composite of unreconciled ideology ; predominantly Christian millenarianism, Classical paganism and rational atheism. Human nature was considered to be universal and perpetual, human beings had developed from a common ancestry, differences between nations and cultures were ascribed to environmental and geographical conditions. All human society was governed by a natural development towards perfection, all *men* given education and the right circumstances would progress towards self knowledge happiness and perfection. The highest stage of this perfection was the bourgeois civilisation of Western Europe. According to this logic, the *primitive* nations of the world could be seen as inhabiting earlier stages of western development, stages which the west had once passed through.¹²⁰ This historical relativity also extended into the internal wilderness of western Europe, the Revolutionary ideologues studied European popular culture as a primitive culture, as a retarded and savage survival of their own past. The Revolutionary project was to unite all people in liberty, equality and fraternity by creating a standardised coherent monoculture; by eliminating difference.

However, within the Revolutionary ideology there was also a current of utopian primitivism , a hybrid of Christian millenarianism, Neoclassicism and Enlightenment colonialism. Primitive man was also conceived as a noble savage

living naturally in an arcadian utopia. In the early writings of the influential

¹¹⁸ See Peter Marshall, *Ibid.* 1993. (P.108-139)

¹¹⁹ The Societe Des Observateurs de l'Homme. See George W. Stocking Jr. ,*Race, Culture and Evolution* , The University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 1968..(P.13-41)

¹²⁰ See Jacques Revel, 'Forms of Expertise: Intellectuals and 'Popular' Culture in France (1650-1800)' in Steven L. Kaplan, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Moulton Publishers, New York. 1984.(P.269.)

Enlightenment philosopher and prophet of Romanticism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, civilised man's fall from natural liberty and equality is the direct consequence of the development of civilisation; private property, agriculture, industry, law, government. ¹²¹ The arts and sciences are merely ornaments to decorate the chains of slaves. The civilised man has not reached perfection, he has become alienated from his own nature, isolated in a web of civility, illusion, and insincerity, unable to trust his fellows or himself. ¹²²

The egalitarianism of the Revolution contained the conflicting tendencies of both an Enlightenment confidence in the supremacy of Western civilisation and a utopian primitivism in which Western civilisation was an alienation of human nature. Christian Millenarianism, Arcadia, the concept of the noble savage and the neoclassical emulation of the ancient *democratic* republics of Greece and Rome, were united in Revolutionary egalitarianism as the belief that the Revolutionary State was not simply the next phase in linear history, but the triumphant return (revolve) to ancient natural liberty, the end of *alienation*. This concept of a return to lost liberty, to the state of nature is fundamental to the work of Blake, to the formation of Romanticism and to the Utopian Socialism of Charles Fourier.

The decline of the revolutionary Republic, the transition to bourgeois Empire was accompanied by a shift in academic ideology. Revolutionary egalitarianism gave way to academic disciplines of hierarchy and separation legitimated by pseudo scientific anatomical research, a fundamental concept being race. By the mid 19th century the concept of the noble savage had been replaced in French anthropology by the doctrine of polygenism, a hierarchy of separate and unequal racial origins which legitimated white European supremacy, nationalism and colonial conquest. ¹²³ This doctrine of natural inequality was a fundamental concept in the bourgeois reconfiguration of society; it was ideologically necessary to suppress the power of utopian egalitarianism unleashed by the Revolution. But

¹²¹ Peter Marshall, *Ibid* 1993. (P.108-139)

¹²² See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discourse on Arts and Sciences', (1751) excerpt reprinted in Isaac Kramnick *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, Penguin Books, New York, New York. 1995. (P.365).

¹²³ George W. Stocking Jr., *Ibid*. 1982.

this suppression was partial and contested, society reconfigured after the ascension of the bourgeoisie was riven with paradox and utopian desire confined and suspended in stratified realms of private and public life. It was this tension which was dramatised and exploited by the Romantics and the 19th century Bohemians.

In Victorian England the Romantic tension between utopian primitivism and racist/nationalism found its defining expression in the relocation of a lost Arcadia to the idealised British mediaeval Gothic and Arthurian realms of Scott, Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and William Morris.¹²⁴ This mediaevalism was a component of a wider current of Romantic ruralism that developed from the bourgeois experience of industrialisation. In this context there emerged a specifically feudal idealisation of a lost rural organic culture : Folklore. In the formation of the cluster of ideology around the Gothic and the mythical Folklore, William Morris is both influential and exemplary. And Morris is also the pivotal figure in the development of British Avant-Garde Art, for it is he who synthesised the bourgeois nostalgia for the feudal order with the vision of a socialist utopia structured and validated by Art.¹²⁵ In his utopian fantasy *News From Nowhere* of 1891 he explicitly locates his project for a revolutionary democratic and egalitarian future as a return to a lost feudal past, a golden age of fellowship, chivalry and craft before the alienation and pollution of the industrial age. But the revolution of *Nowhere* does not emancipate the working classes, it gentrifies them. To Morris the urban working classes are a class who have no Art, the possibility that they might actually have a different urban popular culture of their own is unthinkable. The only admissible culture for the urban workers is a lost culture, a feudal and rural Folk culture which could not challenge the Gothic handicraft fantasy.¹²⁶

Morris is a key figure in the formation of Folklore, however the myth must be

¹²⁴ See Joanna Banham and Jennifer Harris (eds.), *William Morris and the Middle Ages*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984.

¹²⁵ Morris' attitude to the working class is explored in Stefan Szczelkun, *The Conspiracy of Good Taste*, Working Press, London 1993. (P.13-38) See also Morris' lecture to the Secular Society of Leicester of 1884 extracted in C.Harvie, G.Martin and A.Scharf (Eds) in *Industrialisation and Culture 1830-1914*, Macmillan for Open University Press, London 1970. (P.339-345).

¹²⁶ See the future of May Day celebrations in William Morris, *News From Nowhere*, (1891) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995.(P.69)

understood as a complex ideology which although it became central to the socialist tradition of the Fabian Society and the Labour Party, was also later invoked by the extreme right of the early organic movement, eugenics and British fascism. The invocation of Folklore was motivated by the bourgeois desire for historical continuity and unity in an age of revolutionary conflict, it was a denial of class struggle and an appeal to a shared ancestry.

The search for *pagan* origins was both an attempt to establish a continuity between English culture and the mythology of Victorian classicism, and a strategy to construct a distinctly nationalist English cultural tradition. If the ascendant bourgeoisie desired the sacred and noble power of the aristocracy then they also carried a nostalgic longing for the arcadian days before their ascent, for their lost participation in the popular and the utopia of the Revolution. This mystic nostalgia they projected onto the working class as the loss of Folklore. The search for Folklore was the desire for a popular origin of Art. Which is to say that aura was inscribed into the rural popular : Folklore is the aura of popular culture. The common people could not be the agents of Folklore; they could be picturesque savages, they could be objects of crypto-scientific study, like fossils or lost tribes, they could be the primitive mediums of the ancient lost pagan national culture, but they could not be the contemporary creators of an auratic culture; they could not be Artists. For if the common people were Artists then the hierarchy of taste was meaningless.

The solution to this threat was to objectify the culture of the people as the absent culture Folklore that could be appropriated by the bourgeoisie and then returned to the people as an officially sanctioned unifying State culture. The ideological project of Folklore was not simply a retrospective history it was a political programme for a feudal future and from the late 19th century onwards a legion of English intellectuals worked to realise the bourgeois vision of Folklore and impose it upon the working class as an official national culture.¹²⁷ This official national culture was then deployed against urban popular culture, as the unifying

¹²⁷ See Stefan Szczelkun, *Ibid.* 1993. The key figures he considers are Morris, Clough Williams-Ellis the architect and writer, and the folklorist Cecil Sharpe.

racial/national myth of an ancient feudal Arcadia and as the utopian myth of an aesthetic future. ¹²⁸

Folk as a cultural category has now become so paradoxical that it actually achieved the kind of mysticism that generated its first use. It has no integrity as a description of a rural, oral, pre-industrial or manual popular culture. Moreover the term now maintains a bogus historical rift between pre-industrial rural and post-industrial urban popular culture when actually there was no division, it was a transition. Folklore has become so compromised as to render it absurd, although maybe for this reason it still has ironic and subversive potential. Nevertheless, it must be asked if Bakhtin's *Carnival* is perhaps just another bourgeois feudal fantasy. Certainly Bakhtin's theoretical reading of the carnival is utopian, but it is not a projection of classical harmony and rural sedation, not a mystic realm of aura, not the lost dream of the bourgeoisie. Bakhtin has grasped in carnival the true and enduring hope of the people.

¹²⁸ The contemporary continuity of the Folklore myth can be gauged in the cult surrounding Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings* ; an alliance of humans and aristocratic elves against the dark industry of the underworld.

Section B: Cinema at the Heart of the Pop/Art

Conflict

This section will first contextualise the development of popular cinema in the historical conflict of Art and popular culture. Second, it will consider the origins of European Avant Garde film, and third it will trace the development of British alternatives to the popular film industry from 1925 to the advent of the London Film Makers Co-Op in 1966.

Chapter four is essentially a return to the history of the popular tradition which tracks the techniques of popular montage to the formation of cinema culture. The chapter ends by considering the deployment of bourgeois sedation against popular cinema.

Chapter five is a brief account of the key agents and initiatives in the formation of the first Avant Garde film movement in Paris in the 1920s. This historic dawn is considered as an Art strategy to appropriate and purge popular cinema.

Chapter six first describes the development of the inter-war British Independent film movement and concludes by locating the origins of the State funded film sector in the work of the British Documentary movement and the post-war Free Cinema group.

Chapter seven is a reclamation of the neglected history of the British post-war amateur cine movement which reconciles the convivial, collective and unprofessional culture of amateurism with the radical impulse of experimental film.

Chapter Four

Montage Culture : Cinema as the Popular Function of Film.

In 1951 the post-war Labour State held the Festival of Britain on the South Bank of the Thames, where for hundreds of years ballad singers, puppet theatres and itinerant entertainers had set up their booths, and where Philip Astley had built the first circus of the modern tradition in the 1770s.¹²⁹ As a contribution to the festival the combined British film industry produced *The Magic Box* (Dir. Ronald Neame 1951), a feature based on the life of the pioneer cinematographer William Friese-Green.¹³⁰ The most enchanting scene in this affectionate hokum reclaims the invention of moving picture technology for Britain....on a dark and rainy night, in his dingy workshop, Friese-Green (Robert Donat) finally stumbles on *the secret of film projection*. Having no one to share his discovery with, he invites a neighbourhood police constable into the workshop. The copper is amazed by the eerie supernatural flickering images and his amazement is very convincing since he is played by Sir Laurence Olivier in a star cameo.

It is now widely agreed that cinematography was not discovered like cultural penicillin or invented by a Promethean genius as a gift for innocents. And, contrary to some of the more arcane Theoretical speculation there's no reason to suppose that cinema was born into the world as a baby Art which then had to pass through the equivalent stages in human psychic development.¹³¹

The technology of film was developed internationally by diverse agents, in multiple forms, incrementally over hundreds of years. The final desperate race for the complete and integrated technology can be attributed to a number of key

¹²⁹ The modern circus developed principally from spectacular exhibitions of athletic and trick horse riding by teachers who turned to entertainment as the spread of private carriages undermined the riding schools. Astley was the son of a cabinet maker who had joined the dragoons and become an accomplished and renowned horseman and trainer. On leaving the army he originally founded a riding school in Lambeth but soon discovered that there was more money to be made in show business. See Rupert Croft-Cooke and Peter Cotes, *Circus, A World History*, Elek, London (1976)(P.39-50).

¹³⁰ Michael Chanan Ibid. (1980)(P.175).

¹³¹ See Chanan on Noel Burch, Michael Chanan Ibid. (1980)(P.290-291).

technicians working in parallel in the 1890s.¹³² But *cinema* is not primarily a technology, it is a cultural tradition which at its broadest must include technical, formal, economic, industrial, social and historical factors. Moreover, cinema is not and never was an isolated or autonomous culture. Against the standard histories of the technological imperative of film we must now deploy the history of a popular and integrated audio-visual montage, for if it is true that the development of cinema was made possible by advances in technology, it is also inextricably true that the selection and mobilisation of these technological advances was driven by the demands and desires of popular culture. Central to this argument is a conceptual model of (audio-visual) montage as a cultural form distinct and irreducible to either technology or written language/literature. In the first case this is because, although there are obviously *medium specific* qualities to every technology, there are, more significantly, audio-visual forms, works, skills, traditions and desires which have transcended technology. In the second case because however critically productive the description of audio-visual montage as *text* may be, it is inescapably a metaphor at a poetic remove from a direct investigation of an audio-visual culture. This chapter will return to the history of the illegitimate popular tradition to contextualise the development of popular audio-visual montage. It will also consider and revise three critical models for the historical origins of cinema, devised respectively by *Sergei Eisenstein*, *Tom Gunning* and *A. Nicholas Vardac*. Finally, it will outline the cultural context of the early British film industry and the initiation of the bourgeois sedation of popular cinema.

To (re)define *montage* we must review the conception of the eminent Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein's theory of montage editing is complex, eclectic, provisional and often prescriptive, moreover it changed as it developed and the critical, political and technological context of his work changed. But despite the apparent inconsistencies, it is possible to abstract a set of essential principles. As a film maker Eisenstein was above all interested in how to most effectively communicate meaning through film; how to engage the intellect and

¹³² This would include Edison and Armat in America, Lumière and Reynaud in France, Skladanowsky in Germany, Friese-Green and Paul in England.

emotion of the audience. His conception was that cinematic meaning is produced by the combination of discrete elements. In opposition to other contemporary montagists, Eisenstein held that meaning is not assembled by *linking* frame to frame, shot to shot, it is rather produced by the dialectical conflict between the different elements. ¹³³ Montage is creation by juxtaposition, the meaning produced by the collision of elements cannot be reduced to the sum of the parts, it is a new qualitatively different creation. Moreover montage is not only located in the juxtaposition between shots/ frames, it also takes place within the elements of a single frame's composition, in fact montage takes place at every level of film composition from set lighting to acting. The creative act of cinema is the control of montage, through montage disparate elements are unified into the compound theme of the film. Whereas it is possible to absolutely minimise the montage composition in a given film, Eisenstein's interest lies in complex audio-visual counterpoint and he makes comparisons between his concept of complex montage and the simultaneity and polyphony of jazz. ¹³⁴ Montage is movement, movement is both the condition of montage and a means to engage, analogue and propel the critical consciousness of the audience. ¹³⁵

A common misconception about Eisenstein is that he considered montage to be the unique principle of film editing, when actually his theoretical framework takes montage to be a transcendent principle of meaning construction applicable to all forms of cultural production from cinema to theatre, music, poetry, painting etc. ¹³⁶ This concept of montage as cultural, and not medium/technology determined is consistent throughout his career, moreover his first published theorisation of audio-visual montage was not based on his experience or research as a film maker, it was concerned with montage in the theatre and it was written when he was a young set designer and theatre director: *The Montage of Attractions* published

¹³³ Montage as linkage was a concept Eisenstein attributes to his contemporary filmmaker/theorist V.I.Pudovkin. See Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, (translated and ed. Jay Leyda), Dennis Dobson Ltd., London 1951.(P.36-37).

¹³⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense* (translated and ed. Jay Leyda), Faber and Faber, London. 1943.(P.76-80).

¹³⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, *Ibid.* (1943.)(P.24-25).

¹³⁶ See for instance Sergei Eisenstein, *Ibid* 1943.(P.57).

in Lef magazine in 1923¹³⁷. Eisenstein's concept of the *attraction* originated from a collaboration with Sergei Yutkevitch on an experimental pantomime in 1922.¹³⁸ Yutkevitch was a member of the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (F.E.K.S), a group of young Soviet Futurists who celebrated the radical power of the popular. During the collaboration with Eisenstein, Yutkevitch visited his favourite fairground attraction, a type of roller coaster, later whilst he was explaining the intense excitement of the ride, Eisenstein came up with the term Scenic Attractions to describe the techniques they had developed.¹³⁹

The Montage of Attractions is an attempt to fuse a psychological model of audience reception with the formal techniques and traditions of popular culture, moreover, combined with accounts of his early work in theatre it becomes clear that Eisenstein formulated his montage theory from his working experience and research into various forms of the popular. In an essay on the origin of his experiments with montage written in the 1930s, Eisenstein declared :

I think that first and foremost we must give all credit to the basic principles of the circus and the music-hall - for which I had had a passionate love since childhood. Under the influence of the French comedians, and of Chaplin (of whom we had only heard), and the first news of the fox-trot and jazz, this early love thrived. The music hall element was obviously needed at the time for the emergence of a "montage" form of thought. Harlequin's parti-coloured costume grew and spread, first over the structure of the programme, and finally into the method of the whole production.¹⁴⁰

From this observation it is possible to (re)define a model of montage to be operative in this text.¹⁴¹ Whereas Eisenstein considered the agency of montage to be *conflict*, more accurately and inclusively we could identify the agency as *difference*. Conceptually *difference* would include not only conflict between the elements of montage but also a range of relations between elements from contrast to congruence, variation, hybridisation or intervention. Moreover,

¹³⁷ The complete article is published in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (Eds.), *The Film Factory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. , London. 1988. (P.87-89)

¹³⁸ See Segei Iosipovich Yutkevitch, 'Teenage Artists of the Revolution' in *Cinema in Revolution*, David Robinson (Translator and ed.) Secker and Warburg, London 1973..

¹³⁹ Segei Iosipovich Yutkevitch, *Ibid.* 1973.(P.31-32).

¹⁴⁰ Sergei Eisenstein, *Ibid* 1951.(P.12)

¹⁴¹ In the following exposition I deliberately side step the concept of bricolage expounded by Lévis-Strauss since it seems to me to be fatally locked into a spurious binary opposition with 'scientific' thought.

montage as difference allows us to recognise forms of culture which appear to, or claim to have preceded or surpassed montage and become undifferentiated, pure and absolute, crucially Modernist Art. Second, rather than defining montage as an essential and universal process of meaning construction, let's specify the use of sophisticated montage as a particular cultural tendency or tradition. Although this tradition would not be exclusive to popular culture, the crucial point is that montage is the definitive form of the popular tradition, and it is the popular which has developed the definitive forms of montage. The historical factors involved in this development are complex. First, many of the conditions of montage are already active in carnival. As Bakhtin observed, the carnival is created by all its participants without hierarchy, it celebrates unity in plurality, it is unfinished and so always connected but fragmented. Carnival is the suspension of authority, it reveals the relativity of order allowing the free change and renewal of elements. As the concept of the human body in Classicism became perfect and closed so the grotesque realist body of carnival is a body of protuberances, holes, components and discharges; a montage body. Further, if we consider the fairground as the definitive and formative site of popular culture then it is possible to apply montage theory to the movement of the fairgoers (audience) around the various booths and attractions of the fair. The fair is an interactive and sensual free montage.

The historical development of the popular theatrical forms so far outlined can be recognised as a process of transferring external fairground forms into new internal institutions eg. the theatre of the Forains into pantomime or the ballad singers into music hall etc. The key formal transfer from the fair to the new industrial popular culture is variety and conviviality. Further, popular culture has historically developed forms which prioritised sound and image over text, forms which developed complex audio-visual montage to reach audiences with partial literacy and forms developed specifically to subvert more than a century of prohibition of spoken dialogue and the censorship of explicit political expression.

The historical development of cinema as a form of popular audio-visual montage

was a gradual and integrated process which developed through a diversity of forms. The first peep shows began as amusements for the wealthy in the early 17th century, but by the 18th century they had been carried by itinerant showmen throughout Europe.¹⁴² Peep shows were essentially boxes which contained model theatres and the show was a painted landscape, an interior realm glimpsed through an eyehole or lens. In more complex peep shows the scene would be a performed, changing spectacle. Typically night would fall and lights would be lit in the windows of a city, an effect produced by perforating the backdrop and lighting it from behind. In some boxes landscape would pass before the eye on a winding roll or the image would be mounted onto a transparent screen which would be transformed by a change in the back lighting. To accompany the peep show and to attract custom the showman or a companion would play music. Techniques of transparency and perforation to produce lighting effects and transformations were also used on large scale painted backdrops in the theatre.¹⁴³ In the late 18th century moving perspective paintings were developed which slowly unfurled on rollers, these *Panoramas* were accompanied by a live commentary or narrative, sound effects, music and song. Meanwhile, in the darkness of the fairbooths there were shadow plays, marionettes, mechanical puppets, and magic lantern shows. In the mid 18th century a form of shadow theatre was imported to London from Italy which integrated the black silhouettes of the shadow plays, transparent screens and images projected by magic lantern. The prototype magic lantern dates from a design by Athanasius Kircher around 1646, it projected painted images from glass slides through a lens by means of a candle or lamp. By the early 18th century the showmen and fairbooths were presenting magic lantern shows featuring comic or grotesque images. From the late 17th century the magic lantern design was improved by various innovators who increased the brightness and focus of the image. In the 18th century various techniques of animating lantern slides were developed involving the movement of two or more slides against each other.¹⁴⁴ In revolutionary Paris, Etienne

¹⁴² See Richard Balzer, *Peep shows: A Visual History*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc, New York. 1998.

¹⁴³ Quoted in Samuel Mckechnie, *Popular Entertainments Through the Ages*, Sampson, Low, Marston and Co. Ltd. London. 1932.(P.41)

¹⁴⁴ Martin Quigley, Jr. *Magic Shadows, The Story of the Origin of Motion Pictures*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C. 1948. (P.71-73)

Gaspard Robert, who worked under the melodramatic English alias of Robertson, developed a magic lantern show which took the form of a terrifying seance and featured images of ghosts, skeletons and the famous dead projected onto gauze screens or clouds of smoke: : the Phantasmagoria. ¹⁴⁵ Phantasmagorical techniques were rapidly taken up by other showmen, they were integrated into popular theatre and they became a standard fairbooth entertainment known as the Ghost Show which persisted into the early 20th century. ¹⁴⁶

A playbill from Richardson's Booth theatre at Bartholomew Fair in 1825 gives an impression of the integration of popular audio-visual montage. ¹⁴⁷

Richardson's Theatre

—

*This Day will be performed, an entire New Melo-Drama
called the*

WANDERING OUTLAW,

Or, the Hour of Retribution.

Gustavus, Elector of Saxony, *Mr. Wright*

Orsina, Baron of Holstein, *Mr. Cooper.*

Ulric and Albert, Vassals to Orsina, *Messrs. Grove and Moore.*

St Clair, the Wandering Outlaw, *Mr Smith.*

Rinalda, the Accusing Spirit, *Mr. Darling.*

¹⁴⁵ Ian Christie, *The Last Machine*, B.F.I. Publishing, London 1994. (111-112).

¹⁴⁶ In the mid 19th century phantasmagorical effects were used by the celebrated magician and illusionist Robert Houdin at his theatre in Paris which in 1888 was bought and subsequently managed by the great innovator of film illusion and pantomime cinema Georges Méliès.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Samuel Mckechnie, *Ibid.* 1932.(P.50-51)

Monks, Vassals, Hunters, &c.
Rosabella, Wife to the Outlaw, *Mrs Smith*.
Nuns and Ladies.

—
The piece concludes with the DEATH OF ORSINA, and
the Appearance of the

ACCUSING SPIRIT

*The Entertainments to conclude with a New Comic Harlequinade,
with New Scenery, Tricks, Dresses, and Decorations, called,*

HARLEQUIN FAUSTUS !

OR, THE
DEVIL WILL HAVE HIS OWN.

Luciferno, Mr Thomas.

Daemon Amozor, afterwards Pantaloon, Mr. WILKINSON. - Daemon Ziokos,
afterwards Clown, Mr. HAYWARD. - Violencello Player, Mr. Hartem. - Baker, Mr.
THOMPSON. - Landlord, Mr. WILKINS. - Fisherman, Mr. RAE. - Doctor Faustus,
afterwards Harlequin, Mr. SALTER. - Adelada, afterwards Columbine,

MISS WILMOT.

Attendant Daemons, Sprites, Fairies, Ballad Singers, Flower Girls, &c. &c.

—
The Pantomime will finish with

A SPLENDID PANORAMA ,

Painted by the First Artists.

In the early years of the 19th century the theatrical set designer, Louis Daguerre, developed the diorama , a form of three dimensional panorama show which used transparent screens, lighting changes, and later, also integrated magic lantern projection. When, in 1826, Daguerre suggested to Nicéphore Niepce that they collaborate on the invention of a photographic process it was specifically motivated by the need to improve his diorama business in a competitive market.

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By the mid 19th century magic lantern shows had become an established and sophisticated popular entertainment incorporating various technical innovations, crucially the development of brighter illumination from limelight, gas and finally electricity. The increased use of multiple projectors allowed spectacular dissolves from image to image and even animated moving sequences. The show would be accompanied by music and a Lecturer who would narrate or link the slide sequence, drawing the audience's attention to significant details in the images. Many of the most popular lantern sequences were sensational narratives taken from popular literature and composed as melodramatic tableau. From the work of Daguerre, Bayard, Fox Talbot and others the photographic lantern slide was developed. Before photography the lantern lecture was dependent on a limited range of hand painted or printed slides, the photographic slide introduced a new element of attraction: the spectacle of reality. Moreover photographic slides could be industrially reproduced and distributed. An immensely popular form which emerged from the photographic slide lecture was the travelogue , an illustrated narrative journey to exotic lands. The journey or *ride* is a fundamental fairground attraction which dates back to mediaeval tournaments, horse rides, swings and sledging. Mechanical rides such as wooden roundabouts and wheels powered by people or horses appeared at English fairs in the 17th century.¹⁴⁹ In the late sixteenth century there developed in Russia a form of very fast downhill ice sledging which was eventually reproduced in Paris at the end of the 18th century by substituting a track of closely spaced rollers upon which a sled would coast, from this the Roller Coaster developed. The advent of steam power led to the

¹⁴⁸ Michael Chanan, *Ibid.* 1980.(P.114).

¹⁴⁹ Ian Starsmore, *Ibid.* 1975. (P.16)

development of fully mechanised rides such as the carousel, the steam velocipede, the switchback and the big wheel in the late 19th century. The Victorian steam carousel was a virtual montage machine designed to engage the diverse senses of both spectators and riders; the commotion of the fair whirls before your eyes, the sky, the mirrors, the gaudy wooden horses lurch and plunge, the smell of grease and smoke, the loud and glittering steam organ with all its various moving components, the automata puppet bands men, and around the base and top of the frame a strip of painted tableau scenes or portraits.¹⁵⁰

The innovation of moving image illusion based on the rapid alternation of variant images can be traced to a series of optical experiments and amusements beginning with the spinning disc known as the Thaumotrope (1827). Probably the first device which created continuous animated movement from painted or printed images was Plateau's Phenakistoscope (1833), as early as 1853 Phenakistoscope techniques were being combined with magic lantern technology to produce projected animated images.¹⁵¹ The most successful collective entertainment to employ this technology was Emile Reynaud's *Pantomimes Lumineuses* which he presented at the Musée Grevin in 1892.¹⁵²

In 1894 a parlour opened in Oxford Street, London displaying Edison's Kinetoscope, a form of peep show which used both photographic and moving image technology. The first commercial films Edison produced for the Kinetoscope were vaudeville performers doing their acts, famously Annabelle Moore doing her celebrated Butterfly Dance.¹⁵³ Incorporating and improving on the Kinetoscope, photographic film projection was developed a year later, most influentially Lumière's Cinématograph (1895) which was first demonstrated in London in 1896, however, before it arrived in England Birt Acres had already

¹⁵⁰ A direct link between the fairground ride and early cinema was the series of 'phantom ride' films which were shot from the front of moving railway locomotives, and the chain of Hales Tours cinemas which were designed and furnished as simulated railway carriages in which the audience would sit in passenger seats and watch a phantom ride film.

¹⁵¹ C.W.Ceram, *Archeology of the Cinema*, Thames and Hudson, London (1965)(P.73).

¹⁵² See Vanessa R.Schwartz, 'Spectacular Realities:Early Mass Culture' in *Fin-De-Siecle Paris*, University of California press,(1998.)(P.177-199).

¹⁵³ Ian Christie, *Ibid.* 1994. (P.65).

demonstrated the rival system that he had developed with R.W. Paul.

Although the initial demonstrations of film technology were staged in respectable bourgeois institutes for genteel audiences, cinema is the point where the popular begins to use film technology. Within a year of the Lumiere show one reel films were appearing at fairbooths, music halls and variety theatres, travelling projectionists were touring the country putting on shows in any hall for hire and stage magicians were integrating film illusion into their programmes. At the music halls the cinematograph was integrated into the programme as a turn amongst the live acts.

In the early years of cinema the larger fairs would often have four or five competing booth cinemas, and the grandest were huge tents with spectacular walk-up facades in which an audience of up to a thousand would watch films accompanied by a majestic mechanical organ. ¹⁵⁴

The earliest films were one shot, static records of events characterised by their spectacular motion: workers leaving the Lumière factory, a train leaving a station, a stormy sea, a boat leaving a harbour...The attraction of the first films was not so much their content but the cinematographic process itself, the turn on the music hall bill was not the title of a film, it was the name of the new machine, the Cinematograph or the Bioscope. The projectionist and the projector would be visible or would often stand amongst the audience as a performer, and in the convivial atmosphere of the music hall the audience could shout out requests that certain films or sequences be repeated. As the initial novelty waned and commercial competition increased, film making rapidly expanded into new forms of actuality, travel, sporting events, music hall acts, news, trick films, comedies, ghost stories, animation. These early cinema shows, like the panoramas and magic lantern shows would be accompanied by music, sound effects and often a lecturer or narrator who would explain the action to the audience and point out details in the film frame that they might otherwise miss ¹⁵⁵. Some films would be shot so

¹⁵⁴ Michael Chanan, *Ibid.* 1980.(P.141).

¹⁵⁵ Noël Burch, 'How We Got Into Pictures' from *Afterimage* 8/9 Spring 1981 (P.26)

that when screened, live actors could lip sync dialogue or song, like the performers of the shadow theatre. ¹⁵⁶

Around the turn of the century the culture of the British penny gaff theatres was revived by cinema and makeshift gaff cinemas spread rapidly throughout the urban districts. Whilst the gaff theatres had been suppressed by licensing laws and superseded by Music Hall, cinema gaffs had far lower commercial overheads and they could operate outside of the legal restrictions on theatre and live entertainment. The gaff cinemas flourished until licensing restrictions under the Cinematograph Act of 1909 curbed their expansion and encouraged the development of established and purpose built cinemas. In 1907 the first custom built cinema was opened in Britain, by 1914 there were between 4-5,000 established cinemas. With the shift from the fairs, music halls and gaffs of early cinema to the purpose built and established cinemas there was a concomitant shift in film form from the diversity of the short film programme to longer narrative feature films. The earliest cinema shows would often use magic lantern slides as the titles between films, around 1903 intertitles began to be integrated into the films themselves, eventually they became not only titles but carried the dialogue of the narrative characters. By 1906 in both Britain and America many of the basic narrative techniques had been established: spatial and temporal continuity, close ups, p.o.v. shots, through-lines of action etc. Feature length films began to be produced around 1910 and around 1915 D.W. Griffiths and others initiated the classic Hollywood feature style.

Whilst almost every aspect of the phenomenal cultural generation and expansion of cinema is fascinating, what is really remarkable is that up until relatively recently the early history of the cinema was considered the formation of a spontaneous cause : cinema was suddenly born as a primitive unconstituted infant

¹⁵⁶ See André Gaudreault, 'Showing and Telling: Image and Word in Early Cinema' in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.) , *Early Cinema:Space-Frame-Narrative*, B.F.I., London 1990. (P.275) also Charles Musser, *The Nickelodeon Era Begins, Establishing the Framework for Hollywood's Mode of Representation* in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.) , *Ibid.* 1990. (P.264.)

and then gradually developed into the complex and coherent Seventh Art.¹⁵⁷ However, from the 1980s onwards Tom Gunning challenged this perception in a series of influential articles. In 1993 he conceptualised the Theory of an ascendant narrative cinema as *the continuity model* which is based on three historical assumptions:¹⁵⁸

First the *evolutionary assumption* appears in early cinema histories and conceives cinema before 1914 to be a primitive form in which cinema is an unrealised potential. Only through a period of technological and economic research and development does film evolve into its natural and classic narrative form, or what Noël Burch has called the Institutional Mode of Representation¹⁵⁹. Key writers of this history would be Terry Ramsaye and Lewis Jacobs.

Second the *cinematic assumption* is based upon the evolutionary assumption, it holds that cinema evolved by discovering and exploring its true cinematic essence. To do this cinema had to free itself from the limits of theatre, it had to develop its unique cinematic characteristics, editing, camera mobility, camera angle etc. Early cinema is primitive precisely because it is theatrical. Key writers influenced by this assumption would be Lewis Jacobs, Georges Sadoul and Jean Mitry.

Last the most subtle and most recent is the *narrative assumption* articulated by Christian Metz. This is essentially a reworking of the cinematic assumption which defines the true cinematic essence as narrative. Narrative becomes the means and end of the evolution of cinema.

These three assumptions interact to explain the continuity from *primitive* cinema to the classic narrative film form; cinema had to evolve an efficient narrative system, since it did not have the dialogue of theatre it developed its own cinematic language.

¹⁵⁷ The revision of early cinema history is widely held to begin with the Congress of the International Federation of Film Archives in Brighton 1978. See Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative*, B.F.I., London 1990..

¹⁵⁸ Tom Gunning, 'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions, (1993) in Richard Abel, *Silent Film*, Athlone, London 1996.(P.71-85)

¹⁵⁹ Noël Burch, *Ibid.*1981. (P.24)

Against the continuity model of cinema history, Gunning suggests that early cinema from its inception to around 1906 was not a primitive phase of classic narrative cinema it was actually a different mode of cinema which developed from the popular variety forms of music hall and fair booth. Borrowing the term from Eisenstein, Gunning names this *The Cinema of Attractions*. According to Gunning the cinema of attractions dominated early cinema until about 1906-7, its dissolution was brought about by the industrial reorganisation of the cinema industry in the wake of the rapid expansion of nickelodeon (penny gaff) exhibition (1907-1913). It was during this intersection of economic and social forces that Griffith and other early film makers developed the classic narrative form; cinema was *narrativised*.¹⁶⁰ Gunning defines the cinema of attractions in contrast to the classic narrative form. Invoking Roland Barthes and the Russian Formalists he asserts that narrative develops in time as a continuous trajectory of cause and effect in a coherent and stable fictional world of characters and locations; a diegesis. The narrative film audience is not acknowledged, they are unseen voyeurs. Narrative pleasure is produced by engaging the audience in the pursuit of an enigma and invoking the desire for its resolution, which may be endlessly deferred. In the 1986 article which introduced the concept Gunning proposes that contrary to narrative cinema:

...the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself. The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature, such as the early close-ups, [...] or trick films in which a cinematic manipulation (slow motion, reverse motion, substitution, multiple exposure) provides the film's novelty. Fictional situations tend to be restricted to gags, vaudeville numbers or recreations of shocking or curious incidents (executions, current events). It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to film making. Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasising the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical cinema.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Tom Gunning, *Ibid.* 1996. (P.73)

¹⁶¹ See Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions, Early Film, its Spectators and the Avant-Garde' (1986) in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.) *Ibid* 1990.(P.58-59)

The cinema of attractions is exhibitionist, the audience is acknowledged, the characters look directly into the camera. It astonishes and shocks, it does not develop in time, it is a temporal irruption. The pleasure of the attraction is a conscious fascination and curiosity with visual spectacle, novelty, social taboo and sensational violence. One of the most interesting interactions between the cinema of attractions and narrative form is the apotheosis ending in which early fictional films would culminate in a '*...grand finale in which principal members of the cast reappear and strike poses in a timeless allegorical space that sums up the action of the piece.*' ¹⁶² A tableau.

Gunning's concept of the cinema of attractions is a radical revision of teleological cinema history and the most radical point he makes concerns Avant-Garde cinema. He asserts that after 1907 the cinema of attractions is superseded by classic narrative film but it is not eliminated, it becomes an integrated component of certain popular genres eg. musicals. And it also *goes underground* into certain Avant-Garde film practices. Writing in 1986 at the time of the New York *Cinema of Transgression* movement, Gunning speculated :

Now in a period of American avant-garde cinema in which the tradition of contemplative subjectivity has perhaps run its (often glorious) course, it is possible that this earlier carnival of the cinema, and the methods of popular entertainment, still provide an unexhausted resource—a Coney Island of the avant-garde, whose never dominant but always sensed current can be traced from Méliès through Keaton, through *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), and Jack Smith. ¹⁶³

In other words, the cinema of attractions is not only a historical non-narrative alternative to classic narrative cinema, it is a current in the historical Avant-Garde and a potential new model for the contemporary Avant-Garde. Gunning is right, but his focus is too narrow and his terminology is misleading. The current he locates is not the Avant-Garde, it is Underground Cinema. The process of historical *narrativisation* he describes is only a component of a more fundamental conflict in cinema. The significance of the cinema of attractions is that it provides an alternative model for a radical popular cinema, but Gunning, despite detailed

¹⁶² Tom Gunning, *Ibid.* 1996.(P.80-81)

¹⁶³ See Tom Gunning, *Ibid.*1990.(P.61)

qualifications and protestations to the contrary, is in danger of slipping into the most pervasive and vacuous binary opposition espoused by the 1970s Avant-Garde: narrative = hegemony vs. non-narrative = radical. This mantra will be dealt with in some detail later, for now it must suffice to examine Gunning's concept of the narrativisation of early cinema.

Although Gunning subverts the continuity model of cinema history he does not totally negate the assumption that the narrative form of cinema was in some way *invented* or *discovered*. However, back in 1949 a brilliant study was published which claimed that the essential montage techniques of narrative cinema were actually first developed in the popular theatre. The book was *Stage to Screen, Theatrical Origins of Early Film: David Garrick to D.W.Griffith* by A. Nicholas Vardac , and although it was occasionally cited in various Theoretical texts concerning melodrama, its conclusions were neglected by modern film Theory.¹⁶⁴ According to Vardac, popular theatre, particularly melodrama, was driven by an aesthetic of mute spectacle to develop *cinematic* visual narrative techniques decades before the advent of film technology. Late 19th century melodramas would be constructed as pictorial episodes, theatre lights would be faded down at the end of a scene and then back up for a new scene, sound effects and music would continue over scene changes, continuous action could proceed from one scene to the next, spectacular effects were used to produce flashbacks, dissolves, transformations, even theatrical *tracking shots*.¹⁶⁵ Most significantly melodrama developed a form of *cross cutting* or parallel montage in which scenes of narrative action taking place simultaneously but in different locations could be dramatically presented to the audience using techniques designed to shift the audiences' focus of attention from location to location.¹⁶⁶ The most basic method of achieving this parallel action

in the cinema is traditionally ascribed to D.W. Griffith and certainly he developed

¹⁶⁴ A. Nicholas Vardac, *Stage To Screen, Theatrical Origins of Early Film: David Garrick to D.W.Griffith* (1949) Da Capo Press, Inc. New York. 1987.

¹⁶⁵ A. Nicholas Vardac, *Ibid* 1987. (P.26)

¹⁶⁶ These locations could be different rooms in the same house, different parts of the same city or distant locations such as the narrative linking of the twins in Paris and Corsica in Dion Boucicault's famous version of the Corsican Brothers (1852).

many of the narrative montage techniques specific to the cinema, but Griffith's understanding of popular narrative montage techniques was based on years of experience as an actor and writer in theatrical melodrama, he did not so much invent narrative montage techniques as translate them from popular theatre.¹⁶⁷ Vardac goes further, his cinema history is an absolute inversion of both the continuity model and Gunning, he proposes that cinema was not a new cultural or technological medium which gradually developed its own cinematic form, rather it was a necessary migration and culmination of a cultural mode from theatrical to cinematic means. Cinema was invented because popular narrative montage had outgrown the capabilities of the theatre :

...the peak of Victorian aesthetic activity, with its highly pictorial bias in the arts of staging, the drama, and the novel, coincided with the final phase in the invention of the motion picture. The relationship suggested by these chronological parallels is significant. It would suggest the well known adage, "Necessity is the mother of invention." The motion picture, like the realistic-romantic expression in the arts, was deeply rooted, even during its long period of incubation, in the social needs of the times. The obvious implications would still those untutored critics who maintain that cinema arrived simply when the necessary technical knowledge and equipment were available. Cinema was not born simply with the invention of Eastman's celluloid film nor with the arrival of the motion-picture camera; the need for cinema had been felt as early as 1824, and its conception and early development occurred with analogous advances in the theatre of realism and romance. Both responded to the same popular "tension", the same aesthetic preference. The facilities were products of the need, and not the need of the facilities.¹⁶⁸

Vardac conceives *the aesthetic needs* which drove the development of narrative cinema as *realistic-romantic* but he blurs the distinction between the legitimate and the popular theatre precisely during the historic period in which a new legitimate bourgeois Art theatre was emerging: *Naturalism*.

The significance of theatrical Naturalism in cinema history is complex and deceptive. Whereas Naturalism was conceived by its continental pioneers as functional, socially radical and democratic, its trajectory in England is indivisible from the Avant-Garde autonomisation of Art. This would at first appear to be a contradiction in terms since the manifestos of Naturalism above all demand a

¹⁶⁷ Griffith's film *Intolerance* (1916) was a spectacular combination of theatrical melodrama, innovative parallel editing and multiple narrative which had a profound international influence.

¹⁶⁸ A. Nicholas Vardac, *Ibid* 1987. (P.235-236)

natural and truthful engagement with contemporary life. ¹⁶⁹ Naturalism seeks to apply the objective analytic method of the natural sciences to drama, to dramatise an authentic relationship between action, character and social environment. ¹⁷⁰ However this radical desire for social *truth* must be seen in the context of the Avant-Garde as the desire for pure form, the stripping away of all theatrical convention, the elimination of vulgar spectacle and the end of all the demeaning social interaction between the stage and the audience. Central to the Naturalist project is the construction of the conventional fourth wall, behind which the fictional world, the diegesis, unfolds. Behind the fourth wall the bourgeoisie are private, the trajectory of Naturalism objectifies drama, the conviviality of the popular theatre is replaced by analytic voyeurism. All non-diegetic factors including music are removed, all conventions which might disrupt the diegesis are suppressed. Naturalism should not be confused with the sensational realism of popular theatre, the handling of *real* contemporary life in melodrama was an issue of content and style rather than a fundamental and overriding formal concern, and *realistic* effects such as projection, panoramas, live animals, crowd scenes etc. were not used in popular theatre to construct an objective mimetic diegesis, they were spectacular attractions in a fabulous materialism. On the contrary the demands of Naturalist realism promote the reproduction of contemporary life with the minimum of theatrical convention and effect; *the room* inevitably becomes the only space it is realistically possible to construct on stage and long scenes in *real time* become the only authentic temporal realm. The Naturalist diegetic has at its core an essential paradox; the pursuit of an objective and natural dramatic reality negates the conventions of spectacular narrative but demands ever increasing techniques of simulation. The end of the Naturalist trajectory is not an ever more authentic representation of contemporary life, it is the recognition that every authentic representation of contemporary life in the theatre is ultimately an illusion; this paradox inevitably becomes the pivotal content of 20th century modernist theatre in the work of Pirandello, Beckett, Pinter etc. This is the autonomy of Art theatre, the conviction that drama can only ever be about itself.

¹⁶⁹ Several key documents including texts by Zola, Shaw and Otto Brahm are compiled in Eric Bentley (ed.), *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, (1968) Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex. 1980. .

¹⁷⁰ Raymond Williams, *Ibid.* 1980.(P.127).

The development of English Naturalism is a complex interplay of industrial and cultural determinants. Its formation can be traced to the mid 19th century bourgeois pursuit of rational and respectable leisure. Around the 1860s the popular domination of the theatre began to gradually give way to a reconfigured separation between the legitimate and the popular stage.¹⁷¹ This was partly due to the rise of music hall which annexed the variety / fairground forms of popular theatre, and partly due to the appropriation and gentrification of the legitimate theatre by the ascendant bourgeoisie.¹⁷² Whereas melodrama continued to dominate the popular theatres, the new bourgeois theatres now began to develop a form of drama based on the bourgeois fascination and aspirations to genteel *society*: Society Drama. The development of Society Drama followed a corresponding shift in stage design, from the apron stage of popular theatre which extended out amongst the audience to the proscenium box set which produced a discrete picture plane or fourth wall. In the 1870s the fully enclosed proscenium box set was developed which framed the room like a moving painting. Whereas the action of spectacular melodrama required mobile conventional scenery, the society drama developed, and was developed by the realistic representation of relatively permanent rooms. The natural environment of bourgeois drama became the bourgeois drawing room. Moreover, the construction of a proscenium wall between audience and stage was one of the principal regulations of the Suitability Act of 1878, which was a key factor in the suppression of pub and saloon music hall.

Gunning and Vardac both locate key shifts in the popular tradition, but they can only be reconciled by a concept of cinema history which is far more complex and pluralistic, a history which identifies and integrates the historical separation of Art and popular culture. If the attraction of realism was a key factor in the development of cinema then this realism cannot be confused with Naturalism. The bourgeois Naturalist tendency of the late 19th century is antithetical to the theatrical conventions necessary for the montage techniques identified by Vardac ;

¹⁷¹ Raymond Williams, 'Social Environment and Theatrical Entertainment, The Case of English Naturalism', from *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Selected Essays, Verso, London 1980. (P.132-133).

¹⁷² Raymond Williams, *Ibid* 1980.(P.132-133).

the process of montage development from theatre to cinema is specifically popular. Whilst popular cinema developed complex and original narrative continuity techniques, this innovation was determined in the context of a sophisticated popular theatrical culture which had developed techniques of audio-visual montage in historical opposition to legitimate culture. The most obvious examples of this are the continuity of mime, music, tableau and intertitles from melodrama directly into silent cinema. The rapid growth of cinema in the early twentieth century effectively terminated popular theatrical melodrama; the form was transferred to cinema. The cinematification of melodrama in turn accelerated the gentrification of the theatre; the theatrical class conflict of audience riots, police raids and licensing of the 19th century ended with the migration of the popular audience from theatre to cinema and the sedation of theatre into Art.

The cinema of attractions must be understood not only as an historical phase but as one of the potential and recurrent modes of popular cinema. Gunning's oppositional model of an attractions mode eliminated by the narrative mode of cinema is misleading because they are *both* forms of an integrated popular montage tradition. Whilst it's true that popular theatre developed a sophisticated narrative montage before cinema it was not the only popular form to do so, serial fiction, magic lantern shows, advertising, wax works and comic strips all developed narrative montage forms before cinema. In particular the modern comic strip developed historically parallel to cinema and the relationship between the two forms has always been interactive. According to M. Thomas Inge many standard cinematic montage techniques appeared in comics before cinema; angle shots, panning, close-ups, cutting, framing etc.¹⁷³ The amazing comic strip illustrator and early animator Windsor McCay graphically produced complex sequences of *cinematic* montage, perspectives, *slow motion* and point of view shots that were not perfected by cinema until years later.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ M. Thomas Inge, *Comics As Culture*, University of Mississippi, Jackson and London, 1990. (P. XX and 143-144).

¹⁷⁴ McCay's most celebrated strips were *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1905) and *Little Nemo in Slumberland* which ran from 1905 intermittently until 1926. A particularly striking sequence from *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* depicts the point of view sequence of a man dreaming of his own death, funeral and burial complete with a final shot of earth tumbling down his (the reader's) face. A similar sequence was produced cinematically twenty seven years later by Carl Theodor Dreyer in *Vampyr* (1932).

The diversity of popular culture generated cinema at every level, there are direct continuities from the montage of popular theatre and comic strip, from serial fiction and from the fairground attractions, ghost shows and rides etc. Gunning is certainly correct in identifying the cinema of attractions as qualitatively different to the later established cinema but the attractions/narrative binary he proposes is not the key to understanding the character of that shift. The key to the development of popular cinema in the long term is that it combined and integrated the diversity of popular culture and the dominant factor in this integration was the formalisation of popular narrative montage. The cinema of attractions did not disappear in 1907, the model of the *classic narrative* form deployed by Gunning and many of other Theorists is an over simplification. Whilst it is true that there is a tradition of narrative film making which enforces Gunning's model of classic narrative cinema, it is not the popular, it is far closer to bourgeois Naturalism. This is the crucial point : the concept of *classic narrative* cinema conflates narrative with bourgeois Naturalism. The form of narrative active in the development of popular cinema was not the Naturalist diegetic of mimetic simulation but the complex conventional modes of the popular. Popular cinema operates across the range of the allegorical, playful, convivial, marvellous and materialist strategies of popular culture. Gunning's definition of the cinema of attractions is intrinsic to a far wider range of popular cinema forms than he suggests, including comedy, musicals, horror films, monster films, science fiction, pornography, cartoons, disaster movies, documentaries, nature films, surf movies etc. Furthermore, many of the popular cinema forms which are dominated by narrative actually use their narrative structure to integrate and display spectacular attractions : the landscape in Westerns, the action sequence in crime thrillers or the costume design in romantic drama. Far from being incompatible or mutually exclusive, the montage of popular cinema is actually a synthesis of narrative and attraction, this is the core of Eisenstein's interpretation and even Gunning comes very close to acknowledging it.¹⁷⁵ Popular cinema is a *narrative of attractions*. Moreover, it must be remembered that the cinema show as a single feature film in a standardised and unadorned auditorium is a relatively recent development. A

¹⁷⁵ Tom Gunning, *Ibid.* 1990.(P.60)

night at the picture palaces of the 1920s would include a feature film and a full supporting programme of short films, for instance a serial thriller, a cartoon, and a newsreel accompanied by live music, collective singing and perhaps music hall entertainers. Up until the 1960s the standard cinema programme was still a double feature or a feature with a supporting short film, and there are still cinema shows such as the kids Saturday morning shows, the drive-in, the all nighter and the late night double feature which perpetuate the variety programme. The picture palace synthesised popular spectacular theatre and cinema ; the attraction of the show was as much the spectacular design and decor of the venue as the film, the cinematic montage included the total experience from the architecture to the trailers. The cultural significance of cinema in the first decades of the 20th century cannot be reduced to either a new technology or a new cultural form. The development of cinema was the emergence of an integrated industrial form of the illegitimate popular tradition.

Crucially, the montage of popular cinema must be understood as not simply a formal device but also a culture of multiple and collective production. Popular cinema continued and expanded the techniques of multiple, collective and anonymous production developed in popular theatre. Although popular film making rapidly developed into a hierarchic and stratified industry for the production of a standardised cultural product, there can be no simplistic comparisons to the mass assembly line production of basic or even complex commodities. The collective creative agency active in popular film making must be understood as a sophisticated and chaotic range of overlapping relationships which would include not only the diversity of creative contributions to a film (producer, director, scriptwriter, musical composer, actors, editor, art director etc.) , but also the intertextual dynamics of film genre, the star system, the studio system and a range of economic, social and historical factors.

As cinema superseded popular theatre and music hall, so it became the crucial site of the border conflict between the popular and bourgeois Art, the inevitable target of bourgeois licensing, sedation, gentrification and appropriation. This

conflict had two discrete fronts, the first was an initiative within the nascent film industry which was stimulated and guided by State intervention. The second was a movement which sought to appropriate cinema for autonomous Art.

The industrial/ cultural shift towards bourgeois legitimacy began in the British cinema industry with the consolidation of widespread national distribution and exhibition.¹⁷⁶ From 1905 onwards the bourgeois establishment became increasingly concerned by the social and economic possibilities of cinema and the cinema industry became increasingly interested in the affluent bourgeois audience. The moral panic which had dogged popular culture throughout the late 19th century now focused on cinema, specifically the gaffs which polite society viewed with suspicion and disgust; they were considered squalid dens of immorality, the darkness was a veil for criminal activity, the overcrowding encouraged indecent physical contact and the flickering screen caused eye strain and headaches. The films were considered equally vulgar, morbid and unhealthy, especially those which blasphemously depicted religious figures or those which by glamorising robbery and murder seduced the young into a life of crime.

However, the true danger of early cinema was a breakdown in crowd control or fire caused by the explosive nitrate-based film stock and the naked carbon arc flame used for projection. This explosive technology and the inadequate safety precautions of the early cinemas led to a series of celebrated tragedies. Driven by moral and social concern a series of inquiries were convened to devise and recommend the State control of cinema. Legislation began with licensing under the Cinematographic Act of 1909 which introduced stringent fire regulations and gave local councils power to enforce other regulations such as Sunday closing and the prohibition of particular films deemed offensive. A key requirement of the Act was that the projector should be housed in a room totally separate from the auditorium and the film should be projected through a glazed window.¹⁷⁷ Whilst this measure was ostensibly a fire precaution it had the effect of removing from

¹⁷⁶ Michael Chanan, *Ibid.* 1980.(P.252-263).

¹⁷⁷ Richard Gray, *Cinemas in Britain, One Hundred Years of Cinema Architecture*, Lund Humphries Publishers, London, 1996 (P.22).

the audience the presence of the technology of cinematic spectacle, the show became a moving picture, its cause became a mystery. Moreover, since the makeshift gaffs could not comply with the new regulations their proprietors were forced to rebuild, move to new purpose built cinemas or go out of business. Just as the Theatres Act of 1843 had forced the penny gaffs to abandon drama and the Suitability Act of 1878 had closed the pub and saloon music halls, so the Act of 1909 suppressed the penny gaff cinemas.

Licensing was followed by sedation. Under pressure from the establishment the cinema industry began to make conspicuous concessions to bourgeois respectability culminating in the development of self censorship by the industry convened British Board of Film Censors (B.B.F.C.) in 1912. From its inception to around the mid 1930s the board enforced a strict moral and political repression which included a prohibition on subjects of sexual, criminal, religious and political controversy. A crucial characteristic of this censorship was that whilst British films rarely attempted to transgress the standards of the B.B.F.C. , controversial American films were tolerated partly due to economic pressure and partly because controversial subject matter was permitted as long as it did not have a British setting, a key instance of this can be seen in the widespread moral panic surrounding Gangster films in the late 1920s and 1930s.¹⁷⁸ Eventually the real challenge to the B.B.F.C. came not from the established film industry but from the development of sub-standard film systems (16 mm/ 8 mm) and from film groups excluded from the national distribution/exhibition circuit. Parallel to the legitimisation of exhibition a shift was taking place in British film production. What is remarkable is that whilst Gunning ,writing from an American perspective, can locate the transition from an attractions mode of film production to narrative film production between 1907 and 1913, the same period in Britain is marked by a transition from the attractions mode of film making to the virtual eclipse of British film production by America. Early British film makers had at first thrived, London was the centre of the international trade in film, studios were founded in the London suburbs and in the regions, the industry was even exporting to North

¹⁷⁸ John Springhall, *Ibid.* 1998. (P.103).

America. But by 1910 most regional production had ceased and almost all the key early film makers had retired.¹⁷⁹ The overriding determinant of this decline was the economic advantage of the American industry in its vast home market and its aggressive export strategy.¹⁸⁰ However the strength of American industrial production does not fully explain the degeneration of early British film production, for not only did the industry fail but the films themselves became unpopular with British audiences and exhibitors.¹⁸¹

A key factor in the vulnerability of British film was the bourgeois enmity to popular culture. Whereas in America and continental Europe intellectuals and financial investors enthusiastically involved themselves with the development of film production, in Britain investment was principally restricted to exhibition and the bourgeois intelligentsia viewed cinema with contempt. Caught in the tension of bourgeois enmity, relentless competition, lack of investment, legislation, and class aspiration, many of the principal British film producers abandoned the early vitality of the attractions mode and sought respectability by producing adaptations of 19th century Society Drama and classic literature.¹⁸² These moribund epics were essentially records of theatrical performances which reproduced the proscenium arch and fourth wall of the Naturalist theatre with a cinema screen. Certainly there were popular films, performers and makers but these were the exceptions, it was estimated in May 1916 that 95% of British production was adapted from theatre and novels.¹⁸³ So whilst American and

¹⁷⁹ This would include Walter Haggart, R.W.Paul, G.A.Smith and James Williamson.

¹⁸⁰ To reinforce this advantage the American industry extended its vertically integrated monopoly structure into the British market; between 1912 and 1919 the American industry substantially took control of British cinema distribution and instituted policies of promoting affiliated American films and block and blind booking which effectively excluded British film from successful exhibition. Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State, the Film Industry and the British Government 1927-84*. B.F.I., London, 1985(P.9-11)

¹⁸¹ In 1909/10 British production accounted for only 15% of domestic cinema programmes, the rest were imports, 40% French, 30% North American and 10% Italian. By 1914 the North American share had increased to 60 % nationally, or 75% in London, whilst the British share of the market was estimated at around 2%. Michael Chanan, *Ibid*. 1980.(P.244-245).

¹⁸² The trend for theatrical adaptation became dominant around 1910 when Will Barker persuaded Sir Herbert Tree to star in a film version of his celebrated stage production of Shakespeare's Henry VIII (1911), this was followed by a score of Shakespeare adaptations including Frank Benson's Richard III (1911) and Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson in Hamlet (1913) directed by the prolific Cecil Hepworth. See Geoff Brown 'Sister of the Stage' British Film and the British Stage' in Charles Barr (Ed.) *All Our Yesterdays, 90 Years of British Cinema*, B.F.I., London. 1986.(P.143-155.) also Geoffrey MacNab, *Searching for Stars*, Cassell, London. 2000.(P.1-33).

¹⁸³ Geoff Brown, *Ibid* 1986.(P.145.)

continental European film makers were exploring and developing exciting popular narrative montage techniques, British film production stagnated and lost its popular audience.

In the aftermath of the Great War there was a renewed optimism in the future of British production, but by the early 1920s the American domination of the British market was almost total and British production was practically defunct. This crisis was a key element in the development of a new bourgeois intellectual engagement with cinema, *mass culture* and the potentials of *mass communication*. In the inter war period a new generation of young University educated bourgeois activists began first to enter the film industry and second to form a critical culture around organisations such as the London Film Society (founded 1925) the Cambridge Film Guild (founded 1929), and the magazines *Close Up*, *Film Art*, *Cinema Quarterly* and *World Film News*.¹⁸⁴

The London Film Society was a cinema club founded by Ivor Montagu and a group of film critics and activists. It included amongst its founder members the influential Bloomsbury critic and enemy of pseudo-art Roger Fry, the economist J. Maynard Keynes and the critic Iris Barry who later became the director of the film department of New York Museum of Modern Art. The renewed intellectual engagement with pop culture was characterised by conflicting currents of contempt and enthusiasm; the new *mass culture* was seen as both a barbarous threat and a dynamic discovery. Extreme hostility to mass culture was articulated by significant agents and factions within the London Modernist movement. Many established Modernist Artists and theorists, particularly those associated with the Bloomsbury Group, viewed *the masses* as little more than irredeemable slaves.¹⁸⁵ Other British Modernists were increasingly disturbed by the American influence on the masses or like the Vorticist Wyndham Lewis they perceived mass culture as a form of repressive *hypnosis*; a conceptual precursor of hegemony. Intellectual enthusiasm for cinema and mass culture followed traditional ruling class aesthetic

¹⁸⁴ See Rachael Low, *The History of British Film 1918-29*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London 1971.(P.305-6) and also Don Macpherson (ed.), *Traditions of Independence*, BFI, London 1980.(P.103-107).

¹⁸⁵ John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, Faber and Faber, London. 1992.(P.80-82)

prejudice, and negating British popular culture, sought inspiration in continental Europe and America. ¹⁸⁶ America was invoked as both a negative and positive example of the chaotic power of mass culture, Europe was invoked as the pioneer of a new Art : Avant-Garde Cinema.

¹⁸⁶ See Rachael Low, *Ibid.* 1971.(P.305-6)

Chapter Five

The First Avant-Garde Film Movement : the Vengeance of Art.

The story of avant-garde films is very simple. It is a direct reaction against the films that have scenarios and stars. [...] They are the painters' and poets' revenge.

Fernand Léger (c.1924) ¹⁸⁷

In Paris , beginning around 1916, there developed a movement of Artists, intellectual cinema clubs, specialist cinemas and independent cinema journals whose avowed purpose was to raise the cinema from the depths of popular entertainment to the sublime heights of Art. ¹⁸⁸ Within this dynamic pioneer movement there was a diversity of debate about film form, there were commercial narrative feature film makers, abstract animators, Dadaists and Surrealists, Artists and Anti-Artists. There were both groups and individuals who were engaged in radical political activity and who articulated genuine understanding of the popular. Moreover, there were films produced which would influence all subsequent experimental cinema. However, for the limited scope of this history it is necessary to forswear aesthetics and aspirations and to consider the broadest trajectory of the movement. By the early 1920s Paris had become the hub of an international Avant-Garde movement that sought to spearhead the appropriation of cinema as autonomous Art. The fundamental and characteristic modality of this project was the formation of two discrete but integrated and interdependent sectors of activity: theory (literary/ academic) and practice (audio-visual).

¹⁸⁷ Fernand Léger, 'Ballet Mécanique' (unpublished c.1924) in Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting* (ed. E.F.Fry), Thames and Hudson, London 1973. (P. 49).

¹⁸⁸ My outline history of this movement is principally derived from Richard Abel, *French Cinema, the First Wave 1915-29*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 1984.

Prophecies of the nativity of film Art appeared early in cinema history, but the most influential oracle was the Bohemian poet and critic Ricciotto Canudo. 189 Canudo was Italian but had moved to Paris in 1901 where he worked as journalist before becoming a professional academic. Around 1908 he began work on a series of theorisations of film as an Art. 190 He recognised the subversive power of the popular and the repressive nature of bourgeois culture, and yet he was fatally drawn to the aura of sacred Art. He conceived cinema as a potential new Art which would combine all previous Arts in a sacred Wagnerian synthesis. 191 The genius of this new Art he named the *écraniste* (the screenist): the film Artist or author.

According to Richard Abel in his intriguing study *French Cinema, the First Wave 1915-29*, Canudo was one of the group of key founders of the Parisian Avant-Garde cinema movement, which came to include the celebrated writer and music hall entertainer *Colette*, the theorist/ film makers *Louis Delluc*, *Marcel L'Herbier*, *Germaine Dulac*, *Jean Epstein*, *Léon Poirier* and critics and organisers such as *Léon Moussinac* and *Jean Tedesco*, the theorist who also founded the first specialist Art repertory cinema in Paris: *the Théâtre Du Vieux-Columbier* (1924). Delluc and Canudo were the central activists of the formative movement which developed around a network of influential specialist film journals and Ciné-Clubs. 192 Both had died young by 1924 but the movement continued to thrive, and from the mid 1920s the Avant-Garde network had consolidated and expanded nationally and internationally. A circuit of independent specialist Art cinemas was established in Paris, Ciné-clubs were started all over France and links were formed with clubs in Belgium, Switzerland, the London Film Society and the London/Swiss Avant-

189 Most significantly Canudo was preceded by the Futurists. See F.T. Marinetti, Bruno Corra, Emilio Setimelli, Arnaldo Ginna, Giacomo Balla and Remo Chiti, 'The Futurist Cinema', reproduced in the catalogue *Film As Film, Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975*. Hayward Gallery, Arts Council of Great Britain, London. 1979. (P.79)

190 These were published first as *The Birth of the Sixth Art* (1911), and later as the *Manifesto of the Seventh Art* (1923) in Canudo's own magazine *Gazette Des Sept Arts* (No.2). From notes accompanying Ricciotto Canudo 'The Birth of the Sixth Art' (1911) (Translated by Ben Gibson, Don Ranvaud, Sergio Sokota and Deborah Young) from *Framework* 13, 1980.

191 Ricciotto Canudo, 'Reflections on The Seventh Art' (1923) (Translated by Claudia Gorbman) from Richard Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism Vol. 1. 1915-29*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 1988. (P.293)

192 Richard Abel, *Ibid.* 1984. P.248-249)

Garde journal *Close Up*. In America there was a parallel national ciné-club network known as the *Little Cinemas* which was centred around New York but had cinemas in Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Boston and Cleveland.

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From the diverse and variant writings and activities of this first Avant-Garde it is possible to formulate the broad elements of a project which would become the basis of all subsequent Avant-Garde cinema movements, which would be integrated into the development of post-war film Theory and which is still recognisable in the contemporary vestiges of the British Independent film sector. The Avant-Garde movement advocated its own centrality and necessity to the future of cinema. The justification for this stems from two interdependent assumptions. First they proposed that cinema, when perfected, could and must become Art, but this could only be achieved through the pioneering work of dedicated Artists and intellectuals. Second they conceived the creation of cinema Art as not simply a birth but also a redemption; cinema had to be rescued from its vulgar origins. As Germaine Dulac wrote in 1925 :

Among the viewers a few love the cinema for its future possibilities. They will understand. Many others love the cinema in its present state and it is to them that I wish to speak, because it is a terrible mistake to keep this beautiful art prisoner, an art whose future is so much greater than the miserable little stories we make it tell. And I will have finished when I have said it one more time: Our ideal is far beyond our accomplishments; you must help us to liberate the cinema from its shackles and create a pure cinema.¹⁹⁴

Purity was broadly conceived as cinematic specificity : film should be purged of all aesthetic and formal elements unnecessary, anachronistic or alien to its nature.¹⁹⁵ Within this mystic conception there was a spectrum of experimental practices ranging from rhythmic montage to documentary realism. But the

¹⁹³ Jan-Christopher Horak, *The First American Film Avant-garde, 1919-1945* from Jan-Christopher Horak (ed.) *Lovers of the Cinema*, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin 1995. (P.17-20).

¹⁹⁴ Germaine Dulac, *Visual and Anti-Visual Films*, from an excerpt of an article published in *Les Cahiers du Mois* No.16/17 (1925) translated by Robert Lamberton which appears in P.Adams Sitney (ed.), *The Avant-Garde Film, A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, New York University Press. 1978.(P.42)

¹⁹⁵ See Ian Christie, 'French Avant-Garde Film in the 1920s' in the catalogue *Film As Film, Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975*. Hayward Gallery, Arts Council of Great Britain, London. 1979. (P.38)

trajectory of the Avant-Garde inevitably tended towards the Modernist extreme of an abstract non-narrative cinema.

The quest for *pure cinema* which develops in the first Avant-Garde, particularly in the writing of Dulac and Epstein, can partly be understood as a reaction to vapid naturalistic film adaptations of theatre and literature and partly as a migration of abstraction from Modernist Art.¹⁹⁶ However, whilst this may be true, it does not take account of the specific cultural context of cinema. If we site the Modernist shift to abstraction at the advent of Cubism we could then trace its influence into the various other Arts. But the critical point is that cinema was not an Art when the Avant-Garde Modernists attempted to assume aesthetic leadership; cinema was a popular culture. The entry of the Modernists and the entry of the Artists into the field of cinema was simultaneous; the first film Artists were Avant-Garde Modernists. Whilst in the traditional Art/s the Modernist revolt was essentially an Oedipal conflict between an elite bourgeois youth and their older generation, in the cinema the Avant-Garde Modernists were opposing not only a tradition of popular culture essentially alien to them but a commercial industry which was structured according to techniques of division of labour, mass reproduction and economics which were totally irreconcilable with the function of Art. The demand for cinematic purity is not the trajectory of Modernist abstraction or the drive for medium specificity, it is the demand for an autonomous Art cinema which will correct an historical aberration; popular cinema. The aberration is that a dynamic creative culture could emerge from outside the legitimate sphere of bourgeois Art. As Léger asserted, the Avant-Garde was a form of Artistic vengeance.¹⁹⁷ Popular cinema is conceived as imperfect and impure, popular narrative is an alien imposition that masks and perverts the true form of film Art; popular cinema is a falsehood that must be exposed.¹⁹⁸ Avant-Garde cinema is not conceived as a break, an end or a transcendence of the Art tradition, it is the consecration of the tradition of Art as the legitimate authority over cinema; film had to be liberated from trade and from popularity.

¹⁹⁶ Peter Wollen, *Ibid.* (1975) (P.172).

¹⁹⁷ Fernand Léger, *Ibid.* 1973. (P. 49).

¹⁹⁸ See Siegfried Kracauer, *The Nature of Film*, Dennis Dobson, London.1961.(P.178-9)

The Paris Avant-Garde realised that to reconfigure cinema as Art they would have to reproduce certain crucial elite Art institutions. First and foremost they would need a critical/theoretical base which could introduce a hierarchy of aesthetic taste into cinema. From this base they could establish a poetics/theory of cinema, a canon of *classic* films and a legitimising history of film Art. Delluc's early film criticism was essential to the foundation of the film Art canon and the conception of an alternative and specifically French cinema.¹⁹⁹ He advocated alternative exhibition and distribution structures, most significantly he campaigned against the variety programmes of popular cinema and proposed separate single film screenings and repertory screenings of re-released classic films. This tendency can be understood as an attempt to introduce into cinema the equivalent of the separation between popular theatre and legitimate elite bourgeois theatre, and indeed this demand was a founding principle of the first Ciné-Club.²⁰⁰

Furthermore, both Delluc and Canudo advocated the introduction of authorship into cinema; against the multiple, collective and industrial creation of popular film they proposed that film should be under the creative control of a single omnipotent writer/director or *auteur*.²⁰¹ As we have already observed in the context of Renaissance theatre, the imposition of a literary *author* modelled on the moral, educational and legal status of literature proved an effective technique for imposing legitimate authority on to the collective popular. Once the theoretical base of the Avant-Garde was established as a network of professional critics/theorists, magazines, specialist journals, lectures and conferences, the key to the implementation of the theory was to construct an alternative Art cinema with its own integrated production, distribution and exhibition sectors. This was achieved by the network of dedicated film makers, thriving ciné clubs and fashionable specialist cinemas. Finally the Avant-Garde sought institutional legitimisation from the Art establishment and the French State. Institutional recognition was first achieved by Canudo who managed to persuade the prestigious *Salon d'Automne* to include film screening from 1921-23.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Richard Abel, *Ibid.* 1984.(P.243)

²⁰⁰ Richard Abel, *Ibid.* 1984.(P.252)

²⁰¹ Richard Abel, *Ibid.* 1984.(P.245)

²⁰² Richard Abel, *Ibid.* 1984.(P.253-253)

Recognition from the State was another founding demand of the Ciné-Clubs and it was articulated as a demand for legal and institutional equality with the legitimate theatre and as a recognition of film Art as a crucial component of French national culture. Throughout the 1920s the Avant-Garde movement gained increasing academic and State recognition culminating in the eventual demand for the foundation of a national film archive in the 1930s: *the Cinémathèque*.

Despite the first Avant-Garde's pioneering drive to Art, and in the context of Underground Cinema, it is of crucial significance that, between roughly 1927 and 1930, the economic success of the alternative cinema network encouraged certain key Avant-Garde activists to engage in projects which sought to transform the movement from an elite bourgeois Art into a radical popular industry. The two key areas of activity were first attempts to gain a popular audience for Avant-Garde film and second attempts to industrially integrate Avant-Garde production, distribution and exhibition. In the former case the outstanding initiative was the Communist ciné-club *Les Amis de Spartacus* organised by *Leon Moussinac, Jean Lods* and their friends in 1927.²⁰³ Inspired by the popularity of prohibited Soviet cinema, particularly Eisenstein's *The Battle Ship Potemkin* (1925), and by the few specialist cinemas which managed to attract working class audiences, *Les Amis de Spartacus* was formed as a deliberate attempt to create a mass oppositional cinema movement. So successful were their first programmes at the *Casino de Grenelle* cinema in March 1928 that they had to hire two more cinemas for simultaneous screenings. The initial programmes included work from the European Avant-Garde movement and most significantly three banned Soviet features : *The Battle Ship Potemkin* and Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926) and the *End of St. Petersburg* (1927) . Soviet cinema was officially banned but private ciné-club screenings were tolerated. Within three months membership was up to ten thousand, the club expanded activity into the suburbs and provinces and the membership rose to forty thousand. By September 1928 *Les Amis de Spartacus* had become a real threat not only to State media control but also to the

²⁰³ Richard Abel, *Ibid.* 1984.(P.264-267)

established French cinema industry. Eventually the Paris chief of police summoned Jean Lods and informed him that if the screenings of Soviet film did not cease undercover police agents would disrupt any further shows. By October Les Amis de Spartacus had disbanded and the membership dispersed.

In the second case the success of the ciné clubs and the specialist cinemas actually created a demand for Avant-Garde film which outstripped the production capacity of the disparate and uncoordinated network of Avant-Garde makers. In response to this several of the specialist cinemas ventured into distribution and production and the potential for alternative distribution was greatly increased in the mid 1920s by the development of the Pathé sub-standard 9.5 mm film system which radically reduced the cost of cinema technology for clubs and collectors.

The expansion of the Avant-Garde alternative cinema network throughout the 1920s was dynamic and potentially radical, nevertheless, by the end of the decade it had burned out. The State had suppressed Les Amis de Spartacus, the only real possibility for a mass popular audience, and the coming of synchronised sound cinema effectively terminated the silent Avant-Garde. Sound equipment was expensive and difficult to get hold of and most of the film makers and the specialist cinemas had no access to the technology. The industry distributors ruthlessly promoted sound film and either refused to rent silent films or allowed their silent prints to become so scratched and shoddy that they were unscreenable. As sound became the acknowledged future of cinema the silent Avant-Garde's identity as revolutionary pioneers was undermined ; their work was suddenly archaic. ²⁰⁴ Many Avant-Garde makers were forced into the established industry, nearly all the specialist cinemas closed. The ciné-clubs which had once been dedicated to expansion, support and education increasingly turned to preservation and nostalgia. The movement to transform cinema became a campaign to save classics in a national Cinémathèque. But although these factors contributed to the decline of the movement, the essential vulnerability of the

²⁰⁴ Deke Dusinberre, *Ibid.* 1980.(P.34).

Avant-Garde lay in the ideological contradiction of an Art movement that sought to aesthetise a popular and commercial industry. ²⁰⁵

The critical cause of the fragmentation of the first Avant-Garde cinema was the failure of its key agents to comprehend the trajectory of their own movement. The aspiration to a mass audience within the Avant-Garde movement was a contradiction amounting to the aspiration for a *popular Art*, which would be the realisation of the paradox that makes Art obsolete; the sublation of Art. ²⁰⁶ Which is to say, that the aspiration for a mass Avant-Garde was at its best naive and at its worst bogus, either way it was inevitably irrational and doomed. Moreover, the failure of the Avant-Garde as a mass movement cannot really be deemed a failure since it was never really an element of the Avant-Garde trajectory. On the contrary, it must be counted a success of the first Avant-Garde that it appropriated elements of popular cinema and used them to construct an elite and esoteric annex of legitimate Art.

In the French Avant-Garde of the 1920s it is possible to locate not only the advent of Avant-Garde film but also the seminal variant of Gunning's continuity model of cinema history and the inception of *Auteurism* and 1970s Film Theory. The unresolved instabilities and contradictions of the first Avant-Garde were perpetuated into the history of Avant-Garde film.

²⁰⁵ Richard Abel, *Ibid.* 1984.(P.274)

²⁰⁶ Peter Bürger . *Ibid* 1984. (P.22-58).

Chapter Six

British Independent Film 1925 - 1966 : the Rise of the State Alternative to Popular Cinema.

The British Independent film culture which developed in the late 1920s, and into the 1930s, was composed of four distinct but interactive and overlapping sectors : the Avant-Garde, the Workers Film Movement, the Documentary Film Movement and the Amateur Cine Movement. This chapter will track the historical development of the first three of these movements to the Free Cinema group of the mid 1950s and the foundations of the Post-war Independent film movement. The history of the Amateur Cine Movement will be passed over, as it was passed over by the historians of experimental film in the 1970s. However, Amateurism will be redeemed in detail in the next chapter.

The foundation of the London Film Society in 1925 effectively marks the initiation of the first British Independent film movement. The national network of film societies which developed from the London Society made European Avant-Garde and banned Soviet Cinema accessible to a generation of Artists, bourgeois intellectuals, students, academics and film activists. The overlapping and interactive elements of the Independent movement can be most obviously mapped in the transcendence and transit of agents and films across and between the movements. Ivor Montagu is emblematic of this interchange. Born the son of Lord Swaythling and educated at Cambridge, Montagu was active in the Avant-Garde but in the thirties he was also a Communist Party activist in the Workers Film Movement and unlike, perhaps, any other member of either movement he was also a successful participant in the popular cinema industry working with Hitchcock as both an editor and a producer.²⁰⁷ Likewise the Independent distribution of Eisenstein's *The Battle Ship Potemkin* (1925) played a formative role in the Avant-Garde, the Worker's Film Movement and the Documentary

²⁰⁷ Montagu was editor on Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1926), *Downhill* (1927) and *Easy Virtue* (1927) and producer on *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The Thirty nine Steps* (1935), *Sabotage* (1935) and *The Secret Agent* (1936).

Movement, however the role played was distinctly different in each context. The British Avant-Garde had organisational links with the Paris Avant-Garde and the international Avant-Garde ciné-club network, but it was convened and consolidated in a social and economic context divergent to both continental Europe and America. Whereas, in the mid 1920s, France, Germany and several other European nations had industrial film production sectors that were domestically and even internationally competing against the American industry, the British industry was consistently on the verge of total subjection ; in *Black November* 1924 not a single film went into production at any British studio.²⁰⁸ Consequently the British Avant-Garde initially perceived its project as specifically an *alternative* to both the failed British industry and American popular cinema, which was despised but also envied. As in France the definitive logic of the British Avant-Garde cinema movement was to (re)construct cinema as an autonomous Art, however the parochial and conservative character of British Art was far more resistant to the foundation of a cinematic 7th Art and the movement remained isolated from modern Art and Modernism.²⁰⁹ Moreover, with the exception of Kenneth Macpherson's feature film *Borderline* (1930), the films produced by the British Avant-Garde were short and they had very limited distribution. As in France the axis of early British Avant-Garde production was formed by the activities of a group of key theorist/ film makers who organised screenings and wrote for a number of specialist magazines, most significantly the international periodicals *Close Up* (1927-33) and *Film Art* (1933-1937).²¹⁰ This group would include *Oswell Blakeston, B. Vivian Braun, Kenneth Macpherson, Robert Fairthorne and Irene Nicholson*. They screened their work at the film societies when they could, but there were also commercial cinemas which were willing to screen Avant-Garde films and during the mid 1930s there were several specialist cinemas which functioned as venues for both the Avant-Garde and the film societies.²¹¹ At the

²⁰⁸ James Park, *British Cinema, the Lights That Failed*, B.T.Batsford. 1990. (P.38)

²⁰⁹ Deke Dusinberre *Ibid.* 1980.(P.46).

²¹⁰ Although *Close Up* followed a characteristically British critical trajectory it was actually published in Switzerland and had numerous continental contributors and correspondents. For instance in vol. I No. 3, 1927, a Paris correspondent is first credited and vol III No. 3, 1928, was billed as a special Russian edition. See also Deke Dusinberre, *Ibid.* 1980.(P.34-51).

²¹¹ A key venue for continental Avant-garde cinema was the Academy on Oxford Street, London, which was founded and run by Elsie Cohen. See E. Coxhead, 'Towards A Co-Operative Cinema', *Close Up*, vol X. No. 2 1933.

end of 1933 Film Art proclaimed the foundation of a consecrated Avant-Garde cinema, the Forum in Villiers Street, London, organised by *Braun, Nicholson and M.Hatzfield*. But the vitality of the movement was brief and by 1937 Film Art had ceased publication and the Avant-Garde had been subsumed in the Amateur film movement and the rise of the Documentary movement.

The Workers Film Movement emerged from British Socialist/Communist Party activism around 1929. The movement's origins lie in the development of a national network of *Worker's Film Societies* which were set up initially to screen Soviet cinema and German Agit-prop films which had no commercial distribution or had been refused certification by the British Board of Film Censors (B.B.F.C.) .²¹² By the early 1930s, in spite of concerted State opposition, there were worker's societies in many regional centres including Cardiff, Manchester, Liverpool and Edinburgh. The societies' programmes were mostly made up of Soviet and continental films but gradually production groups formed to make their own newsreels and Agit-prop documentaries. In 1933 the distribution group Kino formed to distribute Soviet films on 16 mm. A year later a film makers organisation, the *Workers' Film and Photo League (W.F.P.L.)* was formed by the production section of Kino.

The W.F.P.L. declared in its manifesto :

Workers' Film and Photo League thinks the time has come for workers to produce films and photos of their own. Films and photos showing their own lives, their own problems, their own organised efforts to solve these problems.

For this purpose there must be joint co-ordinated activity by all working class film and camera-club organisations, all individual workers, students, artists, writers and technicians interested in film and photography.

²¹² Film societies exempted themselves from prohibition by exploiting loopholes in cinema legislation. The Cinematographic Act of 1909 had been specifically designed to enforce licensing on cinemas projecting highly flammable film stock to public audiences. The B.B.F.C. had no legal power, the actual prohibition of a film screening could only be enforced by local authorities. Further legislation brought in under the Cinematographic Films Act of 1927 required cinemas and film distributors to include a percentage or quota of British made films in their programmes. Societies could evade censorship and the quota by using unlicensed halls as venues, by gaining permission for screenings from sympathetic councils, by having society or club membership, and increasingly from the mid-1930s by projecting non-flammable 16 mm films. By 1929 the Film Society movement had already aroused considerable political controversy by screening imported Soviet cinema and Ivor Montagu had published a polemical pamphlet against film censorship which also included guidelines on how to evade film censorship and exhibit and distribute prohibited films.

Workers' Film and Photo League exists to provide this co-ordination.

The League will produce its own films giving a true picture of life today, recording the industrial and living conditions of the British workers and the struggle of the employed and unemployed to improve these conditions.

It will produce newsreel magazines of current events of working-class interest.

It will popularise the great Russian films and endeavour to exhibit them to the widest possible audiences.

It will carry on criticism of current commercial films in the Press and in its own literature, and expose films of a militarist, fascist, or anti-working-class nature. ²¹³

At its high point, around the mid-1930s, the Workers Film Movement provided an effective national network of alternative cinemas to a regular mass audience.

²¹⁴ Film production was far more limited and difficult to sustain, the main area of production was 16 mm newsreels covering various demonstrations and political events notably the hunger marches and anti-fascist demonstrations of the mid-1930s. The movement was financially self sufficient, the societies charged an affordable membership and many groups charged on the door since screenings were often used to raise money as part of broader campaigns. The shows themselves would often be integrated political events comprising a screening accompanied by music, speakers and a debate. In 1933 the film section of the *Workers' Theatre Movement* (later Kino) even developed mobile street cinema vans with internal projection. ²¹⁵ From around 1936 onwards the movement began to form a co-ordinated campaign against the rise of Fascism and specifically in support of the Republican cause in the Spanish civil war. In the last years before the Second World War the success of the campaign encouraged the Labour Party, the Co-operative Movement and the Communist Party to variously initiate major

²¹³ Quoted in Trevor Ryan, *Film and Political Organisations in Britain 1929-39* in Don Macpherson (ed.), *Ibid.* 1980.(P.56.).

²¹⁴ Screenings were not limited to those organised directly by the societies since many other socialist and labour organisations rented films from the various distribution agencies. Kino had the largest catalogue of films, network of agents and sphere of activity. Their shows could attract audiences of up to a thousand, in 1936 they attracted a total audience of around 250,000, in 1938 it was up to 330,000. In 1935-36 there were 764 Kino shows which rose to 1,372 in 1938. All figures from Trevor Ryan, *Film and Political Organisations in Britain 1929-39* in Don Macpherson (ed.) *Ibid.* 1980.(P.65.).

²¹⁵ See 'Film in the Streets', *Daily Worker* 3 August 1933 in Don Macpherson (ed.) *Ibid.* 1980.(P.146.).

film projects. But the onset of war effectively suppressed the movement since new foreign films could not be imported, repressive wartime restrictions on entertainment and public gatherings made screenings impracticable, film stock for unofficial use was almost unobtainable, many activists were conscripted into the forces and the industrial/political environment was transformed by military production.

Potentially the Workers Film Movement of the 1930s represented a financially viable vertically integrated democratic alternative cinema, but in practice the success of the movement depended upon the development of a national network of film production groups to replace the movement's dependency on imported foreign films and this was only ever partially achieved. Moreover whilst the war inevitably suppressed the movement there were also a number of ideological and political limits to its duration. The Socialist culture from which the Workers' Film Movement developed at the end of the 1920s was an ideological fusion of elementary Soviet Marxist-Leninism and bourgeois Labourism which carried with it the syncretic legacy of Morris, the temperance movement and Nonconformist Protestantism. The movement essentially theorised capitalist society as a monolithic system historically determined by its oppressive economic base. Popular cinema was conceived as both a product of capitalist oppression and as a means to perpetuate capitalist oppression by diverting the workers from class struggle. Hollywood was a narcotic dream factory that kept workers doped (hegemony). The mission of Communist cinema activists was first, to screen the films of the Soviet Union, the only country operating outside of capitalist social relations. And second to develop a workers' cinema which would be autonomous /independent to the capitalist film industry and therefore able to reveal the true nature of capitalist society. ²¹⁶ Film was a weapon in the class war, and the power of this weapon was truth. Reality was objective, natural and apprehensible, and film, unlike all other media, could record and transmit the actuality of real life. In opposition to capitalist deception, socialist film would confront the worker with the unconstructed truth; education and enlightenment. In its extreme form this

²¹⁶ For example see Benn in 'The Cinema An Instrument of Class Rule', *The Plebs*, April 1931 compiled in Don Macpherson (ed.) *Ibid.* 1980.(P.138-139.).

Agit-prop realism was not only hostile to popular cinema but also to experiments in technique, form and style which were considered bourgeois affectations which would mask or confuse the actuality of class struggle. ²¹⁷

Whilst the activists of the Workers' Film Movement developed a radical participatory alternative to commercial cinema which contributed to a valiant struggle against poverty, unemployment, injustice and fascism, it must also be acknowledged that their political naivete allied them to deeply oppressive cultural and political forces. The movements' Agit-prop realism was founded on a contempt for popular cinema which betrayed a profound ignorance of both the history and subversive potential of popular culture. Worse still the concept of the working class as doped and manipulated by the popular was inherently elitist since it cast movement activists as enlightened and the unenlightened as manipulated dopes. The movement recognised the unique documentary power of film but mistook the relationship between film and actuality for transparency; they believed film could be exempt from connotation. ²¹⁸ Ultimately, their faith in a non-ideological access to reality was a bitter irony since at the height of the movement, as the makeshift screens flickered with heroic images of revolutionary triumph, the Stalinist purges were erasing millions of people from the real world and the experimental culture of the revolution was being replaced by Stalinist Socialist Realism.

After the war there was no equivalent socialist/workers' cinema movement, although there were a number of fragmented initiatives, notably from the Co-Op movement, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Association of Cine-Technicians (A.C.T.) : the film workers' trade union founded in 1933, which numbered amongst its leadership Ivor Montagu and Ralph Bond. ²¹⁹ The fragmentation of the movement was caused by multiple factors, but most significantly a shift in Left politics from an ideology of alternativity and opposition to the expectation of State intervention by the post-war Labour government. ²²⁰

²¹⁷ See the selection of articles in Don Macpherson (ed.), *Ibid.* 1980.(P.135-143.).

²¹⁸ See Trevor Ryan, *Ibid.* 1980.(P.57.).

²¹⁹ Margaret Dickinson, *Ibid.* 1999.(P.24-31).

²²⁰ Margaret Dickinson, *Ibid.* 1999.(P.24-31).

Critically, the demand for the nationalisation of the film industry became the pivotal post-war strategy of Leftist film activists and the essential imperative of the post-war Independent Film and Video movement.

The crucial precedent for post war Independent cinema was the Documentary Movement founded by John Grierson in the late 1920s. The Documentary Movement can be assessed as an industrial formation, a coalition of film makers and a series of influential films produced between 1929 and the early 1950s. The films were commissioned as advertising, publicity or propaganda by a series of State and commercial corporations. They ranged from lecture/ journalistic documentary such as Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems*' (1935) to poetic documentary such as Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934), war time propaganda such Humphrey Jennings' and Harry Watt's *London Can Take It* (1942) and experimental animation such as Len Lye's *Trade Tattoo* (1936). They were screened in commercial cinemas but more significantly they were distributed through an alternative exhibition network of film societies, schools, Y.M.C.A.S, women's organisations, trade unions and mobile cinema vans. The key makers associated with the movement would include Anstey, Alberto Cavalcanti, Arthur Elton, Jennings, Stuart Legg, Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Paul Rotha, Evelyn Spice, Harry Watt and Basil Wright. Several of these makers were also theorists and activists who wrote for *Film Art, Cinema Quarterly* (1932-35) the journal of the Independent Film Makers Association (I.F.M.A.) and its successor *World Film News*.

221 Most of the Documentary Movement's makers eventually had successful careers in various State funded or commercial organisations and a few founded their own documentary production companies, but they all began by working for Grierson.

Grierson was both an ideologue and a film maker. He came from a devout Scottish Protestant background, studied at Glasgow University and travelled to

221 The I.F.M.A. was a short lived initiative formed to co-ordinate the various factions of the Independent movement including the Workers film movement and the amateur cine clubs. its board of advisors included Grierson, Legg, Rotha, Wright and Anthony Asquith. See Annette Kuhn, 'Recontextualising A film Movement' in Don Macpherson (ed.) *Ibid.* 1980. (P.28.).

the U.S.A. in 1924 as a Rockefeller Research Fellow in social science.²²² In the states he became fascinated by the role of popular culture, and specifically cinema in forming public opinion. He studied audience statistics, wrote film criticism, saw jazz bands and visited Hollywood where he met Chaplin, Harry Langdon and King Vidor.²²³ Through his research and writing he became respected by the American film industry as an expert in audience sensibilities. But although he developed a great affection and respect for popular cinema he ultimately considered it a deception and a drug and he became passionately convinced that the modern democratic State had to actively educate its citizens for democracy and that a new alternative cinema was essential to this process. When he returned to Britain in 1927 he approached the Empire Marketing Board and was hired to develop their newly formed film unit. Whilst executive at the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit (1928-1933) and the Post Office Film Unit (1933- 1941) he recruited and trained most of the key makers of the Documentary movement, and was the producer of most of the key films.

Grierson and his colleagues developed their conception and practice of the documentary around the same ideological precepts as the Avant-Garde which they superseded. But they also integrated into the ideology of the Avant-Garde complex British moral and political tendencies. Whereas the Avant-Garde had contextualised itself as a progression in the ascendance of Art, the documentary movement conceived its project as transcending both the vulgarity and commercialism of popular cinema and the decadence and privilege of the Avant-Garde.²²⁴ The movement legitimised its practice not by commerce or Art patronage but by function; the documentary had a national, moral and civic purpose, it educated and informed the public, it would be the new cinema of the nation. Grierson's decisive and paradoxical innovation was to combine the Avant-Garde demand for autonomy with a concept of public service which justified State funding. Beginning at the Empire Marketing Board in 1929 he developed an

²²² See John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, Faber and Faber, London. 1979.(P.11-17).

²²³ See Forsyth Hardy, John Grierson, *A Documentary Biography*, Faber and Faber, London. 1979.(31-43)

²²⁴ See Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film*, Faber and Faber, London. 1936.(P.49)

alternative integrated production and distribution industry within the institutions of the State.

To understand the significance of this innovation it must be contextualised within the historical separation and conflict between Art and the popular. The ascendance of the bourgeoisie embedded a paradox in the formation of the modern capitalist State; in their rise to power the bourgeoisie invoked liberty but to consummate their rule they appropriated the power and function of the feudal State. The industrial systems which consolidated the bourgeois ascension depended upon a hierarchical division of labour controlled by a class of professional managers and administrators. To rule in the name of freedom and equity the bourgeoisie were increasingly obliged to introduce limited representative democracy and this in turn led to the increasing demand and provision of institutionalised education and social welfare. Both industrialisation and the increasing introduction of representative democracy lead to the constitution and comprehensive expansion of a bourgeois civil bureaucracy. Consequently the rise of liberal capitalism and the formation of a centralised interventionist bureaucratic State was a parallel process implemented by the same class and often the same people. ²²⁵

Ideologically the bourgeoisie was committed to liberalism and yet to maintain their social hierarchy they employed a centralised State bureaucracy which increasingly penetrated industry and social life at every level. The modern bourgeois bureaucratic State is a hierarchy of intensively trained professional experts, they are the realisation of Saint-Simon's prophecy, a government of scientists, industrialists and Artists. The ideological dynamic of this hierarchy developed out of the Protestant ethic, it is the myth of representative meritocracy : the rule of those who with effort and ability have acquired power through equality of opportunity. A crucial function of this myth is to cast a moral shadow upon the powerless: if you have no authority it is because you have no ability and you have made no effort. By deploying the myth of the meritocracy as both a contemporary condition, an incentive and an aspiration for the future the bourgeoisie have effectively suppressed the radical desires unleashed by

²²⁵ This passage draws on arguments in Michael Chanan *Ibid.* 1980.(P.189). and Noberto Bobbio. *The Future of Democracy.* 1987. Polity Press, (P.37-39).

successive waves of bourgeois revolution. The bourgeoisie may believe or protest that the meritocracy is historically inevitable but they also understand that it is in their interest to prolong its negotiation for as long as possible since whilst *democratic* political debate is dominated by issues of *representation* and *equality of opportunity* questions of actual social equality are effectively suppressed. However, with every move towards meritocracy the bourgeoisie are further caught in the tension between an ideological commitment to the meritocratic State and the imperative of power; they are committed to increasing equality of opportunity for the lower classes and yet they have to preserve their elite class identity. As this tension increased in the 20th century so it became clear that since Art was constituted as a fetish specifically to demonstrate and maintain bourgeois cultural dominance, equality of opportunity in the cultural realm would have the tendency to anachronise or even desecrate Art. Moreover, the contradiction facing the bourgeoisie was that in their rise to power they invoked free trade and the free market and yet in their aspiration to sacred and noble power they were committed to an elite minority handicraft Art culture which increasingly could not compete against the new dynamic industrial forms of popular culture. The complexity of this problem is only matched by the complexity of the solution and we have already glimpsed elements of this in the fabrication of Folklore, the ideas of William Morris and the work of Leavis and his Scrutineers. The fundamental resolution was to reconfigure Art as classless and to nationalise it as the State culture administrated and distributed by the State bureaucracy and financed by universal taxation. The earliest theoretical foundation for this reconfiguration was devised in the mid 19th century by Matthew Arnold who believed that his beloved 'culture' (Art) was threatened by the inevitable ascendance of representational democracy; the bourgeoisie would depose the aristocracy and in doing so they would depose the traditional authority of culture and bring anarchy.²²⁶ The resolution to the crisis would be State education; the State as the nation in its collective and corporate character must become the centre and authority of cultural perfection, which as we know is Art. In Arnold's model Art does not belong to a particular social class, on the contrary the majority of all the

²²⁶ Matthew Arnold, 'The Popular Education of France' (1861) from Matthew Arnold Ibid. 1970. (P.121-122).

social classes cannot recognise it, but in every class there will be a few individuals with talent ; geniuses who recognise and seek perfection. Arnold calls these geniuses *aliens* because their love of human perfection enables them to transcend class identity.²²⁷ From Arnold we can trace the development of a model of Art as a national culture, which can be formulated as a series of interdependent propositions. First, Art as the perfection of national culture is central to the health of the nation State and must therefore be maintained by the State. Second, Art and aesthetic taste transcends class and therefore Art education and provision should be universal. And last, that if the lower classes receive Art education they will be spiritually improved and a precious few may even discover and pursue a talent of genius.

The two crucial areas of cultural nationalisation in the 19th century were the development of State Art galleries and museums and the introduction of the State education system in the 1870s. State education radically increased popular literacy but it also initiated the development of a unified and centralised curriculum designed to indoctrinate working class children with bourgeois culture.²²⁸ The first modern radical innovations in the direct funding of cultural production appeared as a cluster of initiatives in the 1920s, and they were not directed at Art institutions but at the new industrial popular culture.

By the mid 1920s British commercial cinema was totally dominated by American imports and British film production was in crisis. The imminent collapse of the industry forced the bourgeois establishment to engage in a comprehensive revaluation of the cinema as a cultural and industrial power. American film, it was argued, sold American products and American culture; Britain was being Americanised and the prestige of the Empire was being undermined in the colonies. To counteract this damage it was argued that the State must intervene and support a strong national cinema which could promote British trade and British colonial values. The key initiatives which developed from this revaluation were the first, the development of the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, second

²²⁷ Matthew Arnold , 'Culture and Anarchy' (1869) from Matthew Arnold Ibid1970.(P.256-273).

²²⁸ See John Pick, *The Arts in a State*, Bristol Classical Press, Bristol.1988.(P.35.)

the Cinematograph Film Act of 1927 which was designed to break the American hold on the exhibition circuit and third, the foundation of the State funded British Film Institute (B.F.I.) in 1933.

Parallel to the initiatives for a national cinema, the British State developed an agency to control and maintain an exclusive monopoly on radio broadcasting : the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.) A founding imperative of the State monopoly was that it was necessary to regulate the use of the vital and limited radio frequencies, but this was in fact a myth fabricated to contain and control the political potential of broadcasting at a time of great social instability and industrial conflict. In the early years of radio there was a score of diverse local stations scattered throughout the regions and operated by enthusiasts and amateurs experimenting with the medium.

The key strategies deployed in the development of the B.B.C. were control, unification and centralisation. The pivotal figure in the formation of the B.B.C. was the first Director-General John Reith .²²⁹ At the core of the model of public service broadcasting developed by Reith and his colleagues was a commitment to the 19th century bourgeois concept of public service; the moral and civic duty of the privileged to serve the well-being of the community; the redemption and reformation of the less fortunate. Public service broadcasting was conceived as a powerful force for the improvement of education, aesthetic taste and social conduct. It would provide impartial information about the world and so produce an enlightened and informed electorate able to participate in modern democracy. It would not follow public desire, but guide public taste by providing the highest quality of programming, and shunning the harmful and the vulgar. It would be a voice for the nation, a culture shared by everyone, wherever they lived and whatever their class. This consensus required a consolidation and standardisation of delivery that led to the gradual elimination of local radio, experiment, audience

²²⁹ Reith's career has many striking parallels with Grierson. Reith also came from a devout Scottish Protestant background, he studied engineering in Glasgow and he travelled in the U.S.A., where like Grierson, he was profoundly influenced by the dynamism of American culture.

participation, amateurism and informality.²³⁰ The *shared* culture of the B.B.C. became predominantly the culture of the educated bourgeoisie of the South-East of England and their accent became B.B.C. standard English. Although there was an increasing amount of popular entertainment on the B.B.C. in the early years, it was carefully controlled and sedated. Dance music was the dominant form of music transmitted, but it was sedate hotel orchestra jazz and not improvised hot jazz which was excluded as immoral.²³¹ Moreover, the programming strategy of the B.B.C. conceived popular culture as essentially a form of bait to hook the masses into cultural uplift.

The development of Public Service Broadcasting was a response to a broader Modernist anxiety around the masses and the Americanisation of British culture.²³² It was both a reaction against mass popular culture and a means to protect and maintain bourgeois culture.²³³ During the war the B.B.C. was forced to radically reconceive its audience, programming was segmented into the Home Service which continued Reithian programming and the Forces Programme which was targeted specifically at the working classes and transmitted predominantly popular entertainment. After the war radio broadcasting was segmented further into a trinity which broadly represented the class divisions of the nation; the Third Programme which specialised in classical music and Art, the Home Service which continued with mixed programming and the Light Programme which continued the popular programming of the Forces Programme. This segmentation was

²³⁰ Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of Broadcasting Volume One 1922-1939*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford. 1991.(P.16.)

²³¹ See Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, Routledge, London 1997.(P.29-35)

²³² See also T.Burns, *The B.B.C. Public Institution and Private World*. Macmillan Press.1977.(P.38-40)

²³³ Emblematic of this process was the support given to classical music : by 1930 the B.B.C. had founded its own symphony orchestra and by the mid 1930s it was the most powerful patron of classical music in the country, the largest employer of classical musicians, a vast promoter of classical concerts and a pioneer in classical music education for the masses. The Music Department of the B.B.C. only dealt with classical music, popular music was consigned to the Variety Department. Reith personally promoted initiatives to subsidise classical music, most significantly the annual Proms which the B.B.C. took over from Sir Henry Wood in 1927. Andrew Crisell, *Ibid*.1997.(P.30-31)

designed as a *pyramid of taste* which would induce the listener to aspire upwards to the auratic peak of Art. ²³⁴

The early success of the B.B.C. was a crucial inspiration to Grierson as he developed his film unit in the early 1930s. Whilst in America he had been particularly influenced by certain ideas of the proto-fascist theorist Walter Lippman regarding a crisis in democracy.²³⁵ Grierson came to believe that the ideal society was an integrated collective bound together by a consensus of shared assumptions and beliefs and governed by a State which was an amalgamation of semi-autonomous corporations in which power was decentralised and equally distributed. ²³⁶ He conceived the role of documentary film as an educational tool in the process of integrating the citizen into the corporate society. Without integration there would be social division and conflict. Grierson's ambition for the documentary movement was that it would become a semi-autonomous State corporation similar to the B.B.C. but although the film units were allowed considerable freedom of expression and interpretation, their function as producers of publicity/propaganda was directly regulated by the State. Grierson theorised documentary as a radical democratic force in opposition to the commercial industry and the Avant-Garde but he did not conceive the State as a site of conflict. ²³⁷ He identified the function of documentary with the function of the bourgeois State ; he sought to modernise and so maintain it. ²³⁸ The Documentary Movement's commitment to the study of ordinary people and everyday life was not a commitment to cultural democracy, it was a component of a wider State initiative of cultural research and intervention. Grierson did not conceive the *education* of the citizen as a process of comprehensive intellectual engagement, for that would be counter productive. The function of the documentary was not to engage the citizen in debate but to dramatise the needs of the State and the duties of the citizen. The Art of the documentary was not to provide information but to

²³⁴ Sir William Haley: 'The Pyramid of Taste' (1948) from Anthony Smith (ed.), *British Broadcasting*, David and Charles, Newton Abbot, 1974.

²³⁵ See Ian Aitken, 'John Grierson, Idealism and the Inter-war Period', *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol.9 No.3, 1989.(P.247-257.)

²³⁶ Ian Aitken, 1989. (P.254.)

²³⁷ Annette Kuhn, *Ibid.* 1980. (P.29.).

²³⁸ Ian Aitken, *Ibid.*1989.(P.256.)

produce in the citizen patterns of thought and feeling which drew them into the consensus. ²³⁹ The vision of Britain dramatised by the movement was of an interdependent consensual hierarchy in which social conflict was active but ultimately unnatural and recoverable. It was essentially a bourgeois vision, a Modernist Folklore which mythologised industrial life to appropriate and control it. ²⁴⁰ The preeminent exponent of this mode was Humphrey Jennings.

Jennings went to Cambridge University with Elton, Wright and Legg. In the early 1930s he was a painter involved with the British Surrealist movement and in the late 1930s together with Tom Harrison, Legg and Charles Madge he was a founder member of Mass Observation (M.O.) a group formed with the declared intention of ending the divisions between Art, science and the masses. ²⁴¹ M.O. was conceived as an anthropological study of everyday British life which would liberate the masses from the oppression of political propaganda, commercial, manipulation and advertising; it was to be a new *science of ourselves*. Clandestine M.O. agents were deployed to penetrate working class culture, to invisibly probe the night and day of industrial life and to reveal the hidden forces and systems beneath. By 1939 they had gathered a vast amount of documentation, published several reports and recruited a national panel of around 400 predominantly lower middle class Observers. When war broke out M.O. was effectively co-opted by the State as an agency to monitor public opinion and negotiate public policy. Jennings left M.O. to concentrate on documentary filmmaking and his first major film *Spare Time* (1939) was a direct projection of the M.O. project into cinema. Watching *Spare Time* and Jennings's later poetic montages of war and nationalism it's possible to feel the heart wrenching poignancy of the distance between the bourgeois and the popular, the nostalgia for the lost Albion, a sublime desire for the common. The emotional intensity of Jennings's films lies in the impossibility of contact, Jennings's can only observe in wonder.

²³⁹ John Grierson, 'Education and Total Effort' (1941) in Forsyth Hardy (ed.) *Ibid.* 1966.(P.139).

²⁴⁰ See also the justly celebrated *Nightmail* directed by Wright and Watt with poetry by W.H Auden and music by Benjamin Britten.

²⁴¹ See Tom Jeffrey, *Mass Observation : A Short History*, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham 1978. .

The coming of war mobilised the pioneering State institutions of culture, the B.B.C. initiated the Forces Programme and the G.P.O film unit was co-opted by the Ministry of Information to become the Crown Film Unit which produced wartime propaganda and information films. However the crucial innovation in the State provision of culture was in the funding and management of performance and exhibition. Initially the State was slow to fully realise the importance of culture in the war effort and fearing immediate full scale bombing prohibited both popular and Art events whether indoor or out. However by 1940 a cluster of centrally controlled and State financed semi-autonomous agencies had been mobilised and were effectively managing the provision of popular entertainment and Art for both the military and civilian populations.²⁴² The two critical organisations were, respectively , the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) and the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA).

At the peak of its activity ENSA was effectively the largest co-ordinated cultural project in British history. It was founded in 1938 by a group of entertainment industry volunteers who initially began to develop co-ordinated entertainment for the armed forces in national and international installations. As the war progressed the military State increasingly developed ENSA as an integral component of the war effort ; entertainment was identified as means to maintain and improve the morale and fighting spirit of the working class. After Dunkirk in 1940 ENSA extended its provision to civilians and war workers in factories, industrial hostels and air raid shelters. By 1941 ENSA had been recognised by the State as the vital and predominant provider of live popular entertainment for workers in the war effort and had become a State funded and controlled agency²⁴³ Its provision was primarily limited to popular music and drama but it provided a diverse range of entertainment formats, from large scale plays, musical revues and orchestral concerts staged in permanent camp theatres, to small troupes of touring actors and entertainers, mobile cinemas and popular musicians and dance bands. By 1943

²⁴² See John Pick, *Managing the Arts ? : the British Experience*, Rhinegold Publishing Ltd. London. 1984. (P. 35-73), John S. Harris, *Government Patronage of the Arts in Great Britain*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 1970.(P.19-36) and Janet Miniham, *The Nationalisation of Culture*, Hamish Hamilton, London. 1977.(P.215-249).

²⁴³ John S. Harris, *Ibid*. 1970.(P.21)

the armed forces were getting over three thousand dramatic performances a week and over 2,000 factories were regularly visited with around 1,300 performances a week. ²⁴⁴ By 1944 ENSA had nearly 4,000 performers under contract and four out of five professionals worked for it during the war, from relatively unknown performers to stars such as John Gielgud, Vivien Leigh, Gracie Fields, Jack Buchanan, Elizabeth Welch and Noël Coward. The total audience for the duration of the war was around five hundred million and the total budget fourteen million. ²⁴⁵

Whilst ENSA was effectively the State conscription of the popular culture industry for war production the parallel initiatives for the State provision of Art were designed to protect, conserve and promote Art culture against the dangers and changes of war. The Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts was originally one of a number of organisations set up in the early war years by activists in the cultural establishment who believed there was a crisis in the provision of Art. The critical perceptions of the crisis were first that many already struggling Artists and Art organisations were facing ruin under wartime restrictions and second that neither the B.B.C. or E.N.S.A. were providing Art for the nation. CEMA was subsequently established as a joint project between private and State interests, the government matched the private funding and collaborated on the drafting of the initial policy statement. ²⁴⁶ The founding principles of the organisation were to provide Art for the people during war and to encourage *music-making and play-acting among the people themselves*. ²⁴⁷ The crucial unwritten distinction was that whilst ENSA was predominantly targeted at the military, CEMA was designed for the civilian population. The Council began operation by funding key amateur and voluntary organisations, and by giving emergency grants to support vulnerable companies and institutions. However, after around

²⁴⁴ John S. Harris, *Ibid.* 1970. (P.23)

²⁴⁵ See John Pick, *Ibid.* 1984. (P. 37)

²⁴⁶ CEMA was first formed as a committee of the Pilgrim Trust founded by the American millionaire philanthropist Edward S. Harkness whose father had been a major stockholder in Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company. See Dr Thomas Jones quoted in John S.Harris *Ibid.* 1970.(P.26.)

²⁴⁷ Quoted in See John Pick, *Ibid.* 1984. (P. 38)

fifteen months of operation CEMA responded to a public and internal debate about professional standards by instigating a policy shift which terminated support to amateur activity and targeted funding exclusively at professional Artists and Art organisations. This shift was consolidated in April 1942 when CEMA was reorganised as a State agency, salaried full-time directors were employed for the departments of music, drama and art, panels of professional experts were convened to advise the council, and the pioneer of State interventionist economics John Maynard Keynes was appointed as the new chairman. Aside from being a founder member of the Film Society, Keynes was a member of the Bloomsbury Group and had been involved in various Modernist Art initiatives before the war. In order to function at an integrated national level a network of regional offices and local advisers was set up later that year based on the organisational model of Civil Defence. Under the maxim *the best for the most* CEMA's activities became structured around the maintenance and expansion of professional Art production and national distribution. The core of CEMA's activity was the staging and touring of classical music events but this was augmented by theatre events and touring exhibitions of painting and sculpture.

As John Pick has observed, despite its innovatory touring programmes, the trajectory of CEMA was not to increasingly broaden its constituency but to selectively narrow its activity to an elite and inaccessible range of professional excellence.²⁴⁸ There was within CEMA the aspiration to demonstrably spread the sacred light of Art into the darkness of everyday life but this mission was caught in oppositional tension with the aspiration to maintain Art as the culture of sublime and unique privilege. Moreover, this contradiction was polarised by the comparatively meagre resources and activities open to the organisation.²⁴⁹ Ultimately this unresolved conflict led CEMA into a complex and paradoxical strategy which had a fundamental influence on its development as the post-war Arts Council of Great Britain : it increasingly channelled financial support into an exclusive group of prestigious metropolitan institutions and it justified this

²⁴⁸ John Pick, *Ibid.* 1984. (P. 40)

²⁴⁹ CEMA received only five percent of the grant given to ENSA and staged less events a year than ENSA did in a week. An estimate based on statistics for 1943 from Janet Minihan, *Ibid.* 1977.(P.220) and John S. Harris, *Ibid.* 1970.(P. 23)

expenditure by mythologising its success in bringing Art to the remotest and most aesthetically deprived geographical and social territories. ²⁵⁰ In this mythological context popular culture counted as an absence of culture. ²⁵¹ By the end of the war CEMA had established the key elements of the ideological and institutional project which would structure the post-war Arts Council. They had developed a policy of identifying and supporting only elite professional Art organisations which were required to be registered Limited Companies with Charitable Aims : non-profit making organisations with educational purposes. ²⁵² They had established the Council as a critical authority which could legitimate the Art status of selected cultural activities whilst excluding other activities as not Art. And they had established the myth of their vitality to the nation's culture : they had brought the light of Art into the dim lives of the people, they had saved the struggling Artists and protected the precious standard of professional excellence. When the war ended ENSA was considered obsolete and was abruptly disbanded, but CEMA made an amicable transition into a permanent State agency. Politicians of both the left and right agreed that Art had a vital role to play in the promotion of social harmony, national prestige and aesthetic discrimination, and that this role could no longer be left to private patronage and vulgar trade. CEMA convinced key factions within the bourgeois ruling elite that it was possible for the State to replace feudal, commercial and private institutions as the predominant, legitimate and efficient patron of Art. It demonstrated that in exceptional circumstances a sufficient national audience for State Art could be generated to legitimise both the Art hierarchy and the expenditure of public taxes. In the summer of 1945 the establishment of the Arts Council passed through parliament unopposed and a year later it was granted a Royal Charter which bound it to the dual function of

²⁵⁰ John Pick, *Ibid.* 1984. (P. 40)

²⁵¹ In 1949 Mary Glasgow the first post-war Secretary General of the Arts Council wrote of her war time experience in staging CEMA events in factory hostels that the audiences actually had to learn how to behave with live performers since they seemed to mistake live shows for cinema and would continue to talk, drink and move around. Glasgow misinterprets the convivial culture of the popular for an ignorance of culture and commends the gradual sedation of the audience as they submitted to the Naturalist conventions of bourgeois theatre and the etiquette of the classical concert. B.If for Evans and Mary Glasgow, *The Arts in England*, The Falcon Press, (1949) quoted in John S. Harris, *Ibid.* 1970.(P.23.)

²⁵² John Pick, *Ibid.* 1984. (P. 44.)

raising the standards of the *'fine arts'* whilst also making them more accessible to the public. ²⁵³

As Keynes remarked soon after the Labour victory of 1945, State Art patronage had 'crept in', informal, modest and very English. ²⁵⁴ But it would be a mistake to confuse informality with accident or lack of purpose. As the Council established itself in the following years it promoted an image of *arms length* autonomy and independence from government that obscured the subtle but effective control of the State. Moreover, as in the case of many other semi-autonomous cultural agencies, investigation of the relationship between the Council and the State obscures consideration of the Council as the State in its implementation of cultural policy. The formation of the Arts Council must be seen as a project within the broader strategy of cultural nationalisation initiated by the bourgeoisie in the 19th century and accelerated by the formation of the B.B.C., the B.F.I., the Documentary Film Movement and other semi-autonomous State agencies in the inter-war period. Crucially the formation of the Arts Council reinforced the legitimacy of Art as the official national culture and fused the auratic fetish of Art with elements of post-war Welfare State socialism to produce the concept of Art as a social service.

Meanwhile, the Labour government of 1945 was faced with another crisis in British film production. British Cinema was still totally dominated by America. During the war the film industry had achieved popular and critical success but the actual number of films produced had fallen drastically and the exhibitors had effectively abandoned the quota system introduced by the Cinematograph Film Act of 1927. Moreover it was now generally accepted that the exhibition circuit was controlled by the industry. On the Left a coalition of groups including the Documentary Movement, the A.C.T. and the Tribune Group of the Labour Party lobbied for the nationalisation of the British industry. In response to the production crisis and the interventionist lobby the government renewed the quota system and introduced the National Film Finance Corporation (N.F.F.C.)

²⁵³ Quoted in John S. Harris, *Ibid.* 1970. (P.41.)

²⁵⁴ Quoted in John S. Harris, *Ibid.* 1970. (P.39.)

and the Eady Levy. ²⁵⁵ Parallel to these developments the Radcliffe Committee (1947-1948) was commissioned to consider the future of the B.F.I. The critical effect of the report was first to persuade the Labour government to augment the income of the B.F.I with direct grants from the Treasury and second to shift the focus of the Institute from providing educational resources to promoting film as a legitimate culture for academic study and innovation. ²⁵⁶ Most significantly, production activity for the Festival of Britain in 1951 led to the development of the B.F.I Experimental Film Fund. ²⁵⁷ Effectively, this was the initiation of the modern *Independent Sector* ; the B.F.I. became the first semi-autonomous State agency which did not itself make or commission film projects but funded them by selection from applicants.

According to the standard histories of British experimental cinema, between the Documentary Movement of the 1930s and the Underground Cinema of the late 1960s the only significant experimental film movement was the celebrated Free Cinema group. ²⁵⁸ Free Cinema was a provisional coalition of films and film makers identified with a series of six screenings at the N.F.T. in the second half of the 1950s. ²⁵⁹ The principal activists of the group were the directors Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson, the cinematographer Walter Lassaly and the jack of all trades John Fletcher. The relationship between the group members was both co-ordinated and provisional, it was a movement, a marketing strategy and an act of desire and imagination ; Free Cinema was a campaign, and

²⁵⁵ The N.F.F.C. was a credit organisation authorised to give loans to British film production and distribution companies. Under the control of the Board of Trade it had an initial total resource of five million pounds and as soon as 1950 it participated in half the British films in production. The first chairman of the N.F.F.C was Reith. The Eady Levy was charged as a percentage of every cinema ticket sold and half of the money raised was returned to British film producers according to their takings at the box office : popular films received a higher percentage and made more money.

²⁵⁶ See *the Radcliffe Report - Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Future of the British Film Institute*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1948.

²⁵⁷ The fund was launched with £12,500 from the Eady Levy and over the following six years fifteen short films were funded out of the initial investment.

²⁵⁸ For Margaret Tait see David Curtis, 'Britain's Oldest Experimentalist...Margaret Tait' , *Vertigo* Vol.1 No. 9 Summer 1999. (P.62-63).

²⁵⁹ Three of the screenings were of contemporary international film including work from the Polish and French New Wave and North American independent makers. The other three screenings were of short, low budget and predominately 16 mm British films by directors including Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson, Lorenza Mazzetti, Alan Tanner, Robert Vas and Michael Grigsby. Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, Secker and Warburg, London 1972. (P.135).

the designer and ideologue of the campaign was Anderson.

Like the Documentary Movement, Free Cinema had intellectual roots in the elite intellectual culture of the Oxbridge universities. The key members of the group formed around the independent film magazine *Sequence* which was originally the Oxford University Film Society Magazine. *Sequence* ran for 14 issues between 1946 and 1952, at its peak distribution was only around 4,000 but its critical influence was formidable.²⁶⁰ Most of the articles were written by the editors including Anderson, Penelope Houston, Gavin Lambert and Reisz.²⁶¹ Their critical attitude had a number of significant correspondences to Leavisite literary theory ; it was characterised by detailed critical observation, liberal humanist ethics, a rejection of theoretical analysis and an ardent belief in a direct and immediate personal, emotional and intellectual response to cinema.²⁶² They reacted against the bourgeois quality cinema of the older generation of post-war British directors typified by David Lean and Michael Powell, and they also rejected Grierson's model of cinema as propaganda. Crucially they reaffirmed the Avant-Garde faith : cinema was an Art that must be freed from the degradation of commerce and industry. This strategy was nothing new, but what was new in the post-war context was the extent to which Anderson and *Sequence* projected Art into a cluster of popular directors including Preston Sturges, Hitchcock, Raoul Walsh, Nicholas Ray and preeminently the films of John Ford. However, rather than challenging the Art/non-Art binary, *Sequence* conceptualised Ford and the others as exceptional Artists who had fought off the shackles and compromises of the popular industry and achieved the authority of a personal vision : they had transcended the popular and become film poets (authors).²⁶³ In the 1920s Delluc and Canudo had advocated the introduction of authorship into cinema, but the conception of the poet-director in *Sequence* more significantly foreshadows the

²⁶⁰ See Erik Hedling, 'Lindsay Anderson and the Development of British Art Cinema', in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*, B.F.I. London.1997.(P.178-179).

²⁶¹ Elizabeth Sussex, *Lindsay Anderson*, Studio Vista, London.1969.(P.9).

²⁶² Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier, *Ibid.* 1972. (P. 133-175.)

²⁶³ This argument is implicit in Anderson's work for *Sequence* but see in particular Lindsay Anderson, 'The Director's Cinema', *Sequence*, No.12 Autumn 1950. (P.6-11/37)

development of French polemical Auteurism in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the mid-1950s. 264

Parallel to their work for Sequence the core writers were also active in the wider film culture and the crucial expansion of activity was linked to the B.F.I. In 1950 Lambert became the editor of the prestigious B.F.I. periodical *Sight and Sound*, Houston became deputy editor and subsequently, Reisz and Anderson had regular articles published. In 1952 Houston took over the editorship of *Sight and Sound* and Reisz became the programmer for the B.F.I.'s newly opened National Film Theatre (N.F.T.). A year later Anderson's *O Dreamland* (1953) was the third film to be funded by the B.F.I. Experimental Film Fund and in 1955 he programmed a John Ford season for the N.F.T.

The Free Cinema campaign was launched on the 5th-8th February 1956 as an N.F.T programme to promote *O Dreamland*, *Momma Don't Allow* (1956) directed by Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson and *Together* (1953) directed by Lorenza Mazzetti. Essentially it was Anderson who came up with the idea of the movement and who wrote the manifesto. 265 The screenings were widely covered by national and press and television, and the total audience for the three nights was over three thousand, with perhaps thousands more turned away at the door. 266 Encouraged by the success of the first screenings the movement was continued and five more were staged: two in 1956, one in 1957, two in 1958 and the last in '59. The most influential films to emerge from the later screenings were the documentaries *Nice Time* (Dir. Claude Goretta and Alain Tanner 1957), *Everyday Except Christmas* (Dir. Anderson 1957) and *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (Reisz 1959).

The success of the Free Cinema campaign depended upon a number of interrelated factors: the originality of the work, the stagnation of the post-war British film industry, the infiltration of the B.F.I. by both Sequence and Free

Cinema, the brilliant publicity campaign and the strategic links with the *Angry*

264 See John Caughie (ed.), (1981), *Theories of Authorship*, Routledge, London. 1999. (P. 15).

265 See the transcript of a Panel Discussion with Kevin MacDonald, David Robinson, Walter Lassally, Karel Reisz, Lorenza Mazzetti at the N.F.T. 22/3/01 from the B.F.I. web site: www.bfi.org.uk.

266 See Anon. 'Exciting Evening of Amateur Films', *Amateur Cine World* Vol. 19. No. 12. April 1956. (P. 1229-1231/1270.)

Young Man New Wave in British drama and literature. The trajectory of the campaign was already marked out in *Sequence* in the late 1940s, as early as 1948 Anderson was convinced that the only hope for an Artistic renewal of British cinema was small scale low budget independent Avant-Garde production.²⁶⁷ His industrial model for the new Avant-Garde was essentially based on a revival of the alternative Avant-Garde cinema/film society distribution/ exhibition network of the 1920s and 1930s. But this proposition took no account of the radical changes in post-war film culture. Since the 1930s the industrial, technological and social division between the commercial cinema and amateur/independent film making had widened and become further institutionalised. The commercial industry had become comprehensively regulated and graded by both managerial and trade union authority and employment in the film production industry was subject to a closed shop enforced by the A.C.T. The film societies had effectively given up competing with commercial distribution and converted to 16 mm. Meanwhile the pre-war culture of experimental film making had become subsumed in the wider amateur movement, which had effectively become an alternative and autarkic subculture, which had neither the ideological motivation or the industrial means to launch a vanguard offensive for a new Art cinema.²⁶⁸ The problem that Anderson and his contemporaries faced was not how to create an alternative film culture since the amateur movement clearly was an alternative culture, their ambition was to transform commercial cinema, and to do this it was necessary to break out of amateurism and into the industry. In the early 1950s ambitious young filmmakers who were discontented with both the limits of amateurism and the frustrating gradual climb into the commercial ranks had very limited options : they could try to get into the new television industry or they could enter the documentary sector developed by Grierson and the Documentary Movement. The Crown Film Unit, the direct link to the pre-war Documentary Movement was disbanded in 1951, but as I have observed, there was a rapid expansion in the commercial production and distribution of corporate and sponsored 16 mm documentaries in the post-war period and this was the professional entry point

²⁶⁷ See Lindsay Anderson, 'A Possible Solution' *Sequence* No.3. Spring 1948, (P.9.)

²⁶⁸ I use the term 'autarkic' in this context to denote self sufficiency in distinction to 'autonomy' which denotes self governing.

exploited by most of the Free Cinema makers. As Alan Lovell observed, Free Cinema didn't chose documentary, it chose them.²⁶⁹ However, although they were effectively compelled into documentary, Anderson and his contemporaries were conscious of the tradition of experimental and subjective documentary exemplified by Jean Vigo, Pare Lorentz and most influentially Humphrey Jennings. In Free Cinema they integrated this influence into an exploration of both the limits and the advantages of the new post-war amateur cine technologies and developed innovative documentary techniques that foreshadowed the Cinema Verité style of the 1960s. In comparison with the established, objective and emotionally detached documentaries of the post-war period Free Cinema appeared as a sudden revitalisation of both the documentary form and British film culture.²⁷⁰ Their work was contemporary and prophetic, they seemed to have broken out of post-war austerity and discovered the real and future life of the people : the working class. The Free Cinema camera seemed a personal participant in the everyday life of its subjects but it was also an unflinching eye that confronted life with love or rage.

The most direct influence of Free Cinema was on the development of television documentary, but the significance of the movement can only be understood as an element of a broader integrated British New Wave in film, literature and drama, which also included the subsequent Social Realist genre in popular cinema and the *Angry Young Men* movement in the theatre and novel. Moreover, although Free Cinema was successful as a publicity campaign and a critical platform it ultimately lacked the ideological, commercial or institutional support to create or sustain a new Art cinema. The eventual breakthrough into the commercial industry was not an Avant-Garde bridgehead but was facilitated by a complex shift in bourgeois theatrical and literary culture and a major factor in this shift was the

incursion of regional/ working class writers into legitimate culture eg. Stan

²⁶⁹ Anderson considered the Documentary Movement and the Griersonian model of semi-autonomous State production compromised and obsolete. As a critic he celebrated the freedom of poetry and personal expression but as a pragmatic filmmaker he drifted into corporate documentary. Karel Reisz began his film career making corporate documentaries for the Ford Motor Company as director of their TV and Films Programme. Grigsby and Vas were members of Unit 5/7 a Manchester based independent documentary group. Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier, *Ibid.* 1972. (P. 151.)

²⁷⁰ See for instance *Ibid Amateur Cine World* Vol.19. No.12. April 1956. (P.1229-1231/1270.) and John Berger, 'Look at Britain', *Sight and Sound* Summer 1957. (P.12-14).

Barstow, John Braine, Shelagh Delaney, Harold Pinter, Keith Waterhouse, Alan Sillitoe, David Storey etc.

The New Wave combination of Oxbridge intellectuals, innovative documentary techniques, radical drama and working class/lower middle class writers reinvigorated British cinema and produced a score of brilliant, highly acclaimed and often commercially successful feature films but the radicalism of the movement must be understood within the bourgeois literary/theatrical tradition of British cinema ; the catalyst of British New Wave cinema was not Art but a populist challenge to the London centred bourgeois Naturalist theatrical tradition.

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The political context of Free Cinema was the radicalisation of the post-war generation of bourgeois intellectuals and the emergence of the New Left and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. But the political ideology of the movement is obscured by its refusal of theoretical analysis and by the vague and poetic character of its declarations. In Anderson's most celebrated manifesto, *Stand Up ! Stand Up !* published in *Sight and Sound* in the Autumn of 1956, he argues, that cinema is both an Art and a powerful form of social propaganda. The film critic, and by extension the film maker, cannot escape the responsibility of social engagement and so must commit themselves to upholding the beleaguered values of Art and liberal humanism. In the call to commitment, Anderson is desperately seeking contact with a lost truth which will penetrate the phony, bourgeois sentimental stagnation of post-war Britain. This alienation is characteristic of the New Wave generation of intellectuals stranded between post-war austerity and the Counterculture of the 1960s. The defining characteristic of the movement was a reaction against the perceived failure of bourgeois culture and a passionate fascination with the *everyday life* of ordinary people. But the relationship between *everyday life*, popular culture and the New Wave was riven with alienation, nostalgia and ambivalence. Although, both the makers and the works of the New Wave were widely engaged and in many cases introduced and

271 See Raymond Durnat, *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence*, London, Faber and Faber, 1970.(P.129).

promoted by the mass popular mediums of television and cinema, the culture was essentially articulated in the bourgeois theatrical and literary tradition, and the audience for the work was predominantly bourgeois. To look back in anger was the gaze of the young alienated intellectual ; for the bourgeois intellectual it was to seek authenticity in the lower classes, for the lower class intellectual it was to gain the authority of bourgeois culture but to become an exile from the people : the Angry generation were always outsiders.²⁷²

The relationship between the New Wave generation and the commercial popular culture of the 1950s was riven with ambivalent tension, at best it was deemed an exotic underworld, at worst it was the vulgar pseudo culture invoked by Leavis. The working class culture sought by Free Cinema and the New Wave was an authentic organic community, a Folklore. But the New Wave relocated and updated the folk to a predominantly Northern pre-war urban mythology of smoking factory chimneys, back to back houses and sing songs in the Labour club ; the realm of Mass Observation and Humphrey Jennings. The clearest theoretical expression of this relocation can be found in one of the most influential books in the history of the development of British Cultural Studies, *The Uses of Literacy* by Richard Hoggart published in 1957. Hoggart came from a working class background in Leeds, he attended Leeds University and after the war became a Leavisite activist in the Adult Education movement. In 1964 he founded the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (B.C.C.C.S.) as a research group in the English Department of Birmingham University. ²⁷³ Under the leadership of Stuart Hall from the late 1960s the B.C.C.C.S. had a formative international influence on the study of popular culture. *The Uses of Literacy* is a complex series of analytic observations and affectionate reminiscences of pre-war Northern urban working class culture which Hoggart systematically compares to his perception of the ever increasing erosion of this culture by the corrupt, immoral, irresponsible and American anti-life of mass/ commercial popular

²⁷² This crisis of class identity is a crucial theme of the New Wave culture exemplified in Osbourne and Pinter but also in cinema with films such as *Room At the Top* (Dir. Jack Clayton. Writ. Neil Paterson from the novel by John Braine 1958), *A Kind of Loving* (Dir. Schlesinger 1962), *Billy Liar* (Dir. Schlesinger 1963), *Morgan- A Suitable Case for Treatment* (Dir. Reisz Writ. David Mercer 1966) etc. The most intriguing and passionate expression was Anderson's *If* (1968).

²⁷³ Victor Burgin, *In/different Spaces*, University of California Press, Berkeley.1996..(P.2-5)

entertainment. ²⁷⁴ Hoggart's most damning indictment of the new mass culture is that it exploits the virtues and vitality of the older organic culture but replaces it with alienated spectacle and vacuous sensation, a form of perpetual masturbation. ²⁷⁵ And the most vulnerable are the adolescents lured by thrills and bright lights to the shabby milk bars where they listen to hollow American Jukeboxes and stare vacantly at their plastic world. But he concludes, in spite of the brutal transformations of the industrial revolution, the working classes have developed a resilient and enduring organic culture : popular culture develops in resistance to commercial mass culture.

Hoggart's nightmare vision of the pop anti-life was conceived in film four years earlier by Lindsay Anderson in *O Dreamland*. The film is clearly influenced by Jean Vigo's bourgeois anti- carnival in *A propos de Nice* (1929,) but the ideological context is the work of Jennings. Anderson was a passionate admirer of Jennings and in 1954, a year after making *O Dreamland* , he wrote a study of his work for *Sight and Sound* in which he declared him to be the only real poet of the British cinema. ²⁷⁶ A pivotal film for Anderson was Jennings' *A Diary for Timothy* (1944-5) a brilliant poetic montage which documents the last days of the war and links the post-war hope for a new classless Britain to the fate of a new born baby. ²⁷⁷ In *Stand Up ! Stand Up !* Anderson refers to *A Diary for Timothy* and suggests that the questions Jennings had asked about post-war Britain had received negative answers. This is the context of *O Dreamland*, whilst Jennings' fascination with the popular shifts from longing to compassion *O Dreamland* shifts from fascination to repulsion. Using poetic montage, ironic and asynchronous sound and music Anderson transforms the shabby carnival of a Margate amusement park into a kitsch hell where zombie day trippers shuffle to the sounds of Frankie Laine.

²⁷⁴ Richard Hoggart , *The Uses of Literacy*, (1957) Penguin Books, Harmondsworth. 1968. (P.340)

²⁷⁵ Hoggart, *Ibid.* 1968.(P.246-247.)

²⁷⁶ Lindsay Anderson, 'Only Connect', *Sight and Sound* ,April-June 1954. (P.181)

²⁷⁷ Anderson considered Jennings post-war work to lack the passion and contemporaneity of his earlier work, Jennings was lost without the certainty and patriotic determination of the war. In 1950, aged 43, he fell fatally from a cliff in Greece. Not long before he died he was in Battersea with the poet Kathleen Raine, he surveyed the urban landscape and remarked: 'This has all grown up within less than two hundred years. Has anyone ever suggested that this is the way in which human beings ought to live ? It will all have to go, it has been a terrible mistake !' Quoted in Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier *Ibid.*1972. (P.120)

Viewed now, the documentary techniques of intimacy and participation deployed by Free Cinema seem patronising and voyeuristic. Despite their fascination with working class culture they remained bourgeois outsiders who had neither the technology or the radical imagination which would have enabled them to actually understand or participate in that culture. The key films drew their power from an unresolved tension between a longing for social engagement and a conflicting imperative to subjectivise/ aesthetise this engagement. The potential of this tension was finally realised not in Art but in collaboration with the working class writers of the New Wave and the breakthrough into popular cinema.

In the programme notes for the final Free Cinema programme of 1959 the group finally admitted they'd had enough of independence :

The strain of making films in this way, outside the system is enormous, and cannot be supported indefinitely . It is not just a question of finding the money. Each time, when the films have been made, there is the same battle to be fought, for the right to show our work. ²⁷⁸

The development of Free Cinema was an integrated project combining both film making and the critical practice of Sequence and subsequently Sight and Sound. The inconsistencies between film making and critical practice should not be seen as a flaws but as adjustments and negotiations within the project. A crucial element in the formation of the movement was a colonisation of the B.F.I. by the activists of Sequence and Free Cinema. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the Free Cinema project within the B.F.I. had the potential to initiate the development of an alternative vertically integrated State cinema sector which could challenge the commercial distribution monopoly. The majority of the films were either funded or distributed by the B.F.I. , Sight and Sound promoted the group, and after 1945 the B.F.I. played the central coordinating role in distribution to the film societies through its Central Booking Agency. ²⁷⁹ Ultimately the Free Cinema movement never became an alternative sector because the key activists did not have the ideological base, the desire or the necessity to develop alternative industrial structures.

²⁷⁸ Quoted in Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier, *Ibid*1972. (P.156)

²⁷⁹ See the British Federation of Film Societies web site [www. bffs.org.uk](http://www.bffs.org.uk)

From the Documentary Movement of the 1930s to Free Cinema it is possible to track a number of strategic correspondences into the Independent film movement of the 1970s : the interaction of theory and practice, the development of a State funded sector, the hostility to commercial cinema and the extreme ambivalence to popular culture. However, the Underground Cinema of the 1960s had a different trajectory which did not radiate from the spires of Oxbridge but from the juke box plastic nightmare of Leavis and Anderson.

Chapter Seven

Amateur Cine Culture : the Hidden Continuity From 1930s Experimental Film to 1960s Underground Cinema.

Before we redraft the development of Underground Cinema we must first backtrack to revise the history of the amateur cine movement which was a vital element of the independent film culture of 1930s and a neglected continuity to the experimental film culture of the 1960s.

The development of relatively inexpensive substandard cine technology in the 1920s was fundamental to the Independent film movement of the 1930s.²⁸⁰ The amateur cine culture which eventually developed around this technology ranged from the predominance of the domestic home movie to a sophisticated national and international autarkic amateur cine movement.²⁸¹ The historical development of the movement was an expansion from an elite bourgeois culture at its inception to a mass popular hobby in the 1960s. Moreover, whilst the dynamism of the Avant-Garde and the Workers Film Movement was effectively dispersed by the onset of the Second World War, the expansion of the broader amateur cine movement was only temporarily suspended. The post-war movement proliferated and established itself as an autarkic subculture which incorporated key agents and functions of the 1930s Independent movement. But this is a crucial point of continuity which is neglected by the key studies of the 1930s movement.²⁸² What is more remarkable is that none of the standard historical surveys of experimental film since the 1970s, including Al Rees' *A History*

²⁸⁰ In the early 1920s Pathé introduced the 9.5 mm system and Kodak introduced the 16 mm system and non-flammable reversal film stock, which was not only far cheaper than negative stock, but as we have seen, was used to subvert British film censorship. In the early 1930s competition in the market, increasing demand and technical innovation resulted in the production of the first amateur cine equipment within the financial reach of the middle and lower middle classes. In the mid 1930s Kodak introduced colour reversal film, 16 mm sound equipment and the first viable 8 mm system. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s a range of sync sound systems were introduced for the 8 mm gauge and finally in the mid 1960s Kodak developed the Super 8 mm system which increased the relative projected frame size of 8 mm film by 50% and was sold in an easy to load sealed plastic cartridge.

²⁸¹ I use *autarkic* here to denote self sufficiency.

²⁸² A significant example of this neglect is Don Macpherson, 'Amateur Films : Introduction' in Don Macpherson (ed.) *Ibid.* 1980. (P.191-198.).

of *Experimental Film and Video* (1999), have acknowledged the continuity of British experimental film making from the 1930s through to the post-war amateur movement and the Underground cinema of the 1960s.²⁸³ Almost as a retelling of the immaculate conception of cinema, the creation myth of 1970s Independent film/video substantially remains a spontaneous resurrection from a twenty five year cultural vacuum, whilst in fact the post-war amateur movement was in many ways more independent and far more nationally devolved and integrated than the London centred Independent movement of the 1970s.

As amateur cine equipment became increasingly available in the 1930s a national culture of amateur cine clubs and specialist amateur cine magazines developed. The clubs made equipment and resources available to members who would otherwise be financially unable to afford them, they offered advice and support to beginners, held screenings and gave *lone workers* the opportunity to work collectively. A network of interlinked associations was established, principally the Federation of Cinematograph Societies (F.C.S.) which represented the clubs, the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (I.A.C.) which primarily represented lone workers and the British Amateur Cinematographers' Central Council which was formed to represent British amateur organisations within the international federation, the Union Internationale du Cinema d'Amateurs (Unica). Amongst the first specialist magazines were *Amateur Film* and *Home Movies and Home Talkies*, but the longest running and crucial co-ordinating publication of the movement was the monthly *Amateur Cine World* (A.C.W.) first published in 1934, published weekly in the 1960s and now published quarterly as *Amateur Cine Enthusiast*.²⁸⁴

²⁸³ The work of the Free Cinema movement and the Scottish maker Margaret Tait have been acknowledged as exceptional instances and most recently Margaret Dickinson has briefly outlined certain key continuities from the 1930s Independent movement into the post war period in her collection *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*. See Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, B.F.I., London. 1999.

²⁸⁴ The outline of the post war Amateur Film Movement which follows is based on a broad reading of *Amateur Cine World* and similar publications including *Amateur Movie-Maker*, *Cine Camera* and *8 mm Magazine*, and it concentrates on the heyday of the movement; from the end of the war to the mid 1960s. Despite the advent of video and the venerable age of most of its participants, the movement still exists, but in the context of this history the crucial issue is the significance of the movement as an unofficial culture prior to the advent of the Underground Cinema of the 1960s.

The two core overlapping activities of the amateur movement were *amateur cinema* (exhibition) and *amateur film making* (production).

At its most basic amateur cinema could be limited to a lone enthusiast with a projector giving family screenings of home movies or professional films rented or bought from one of the many cine film libraries.²⁸⁵ At its most sophisticated it could be a regular club or film society screening in a purpose designed amateur auditorium. Amateur Cine World regularly featured articles on how to stage club screenings, how to build a cinema in your own home or workplace, or how to choose music to play with silent films etc. Clubs often used local church or civic halls for screenings but a few had permanent premises which doubled as studios and cinemas. During the war there was a vast increase in the use of 16 mm film for military / official screenings of instructional, propaganda and entertainment material and this led to a substantial increase in the post-war availability of 16 mm films and equipment. After the war the film society movement gradually converted from 35 mm to 16 mm and the differentiation between a cine club and a film society was often blurred; some film societies had production groups and cine clubs often held screenings of commercial, classic and foreign films.²⁸⁶ Many leading cine clubs also distributed their own work within the amateur movement, the F.C.S. and the I.A.C. had film libraries and A.C.W. of December 1956 lists over 50 clubs with films for hire.²⁸⁷

Increasingly in the post-war period the State, industry and various national and international institutions and corporations sponsored professional 16 mm documentaries and informational films which were distributed free or almost free to the amateur movement. In the early 1950s two 16 mm distribution companies

²⁸⁵ A.C.W. March-May 1946 carries adverts for around a dozen regional cine libraries with catalogues of 16 mm, 9.5 mm and 8 mm films for hire.

²⁸⁶ The society movement thrived after the war increasing from around 50 in 1945 to around 250 in 1954 and 500 in the early 1960s. See the British Federation of Film Societies web site www.bffs.org.uk These figures are probably underestimates since there were many clubs and societies not affiliated to the B.B.F.S. According to Charles Cooper there were around 700 film societies in the early 1950s. See interview in Margaret Dickinson, *Ibid.* 1999.(P.211).

²⁸⁷ 'A Catalogue of Amateur Films for Club and Home Showing' (Uncredited) *Amateur Cine World* Vol.20 No. 8 December 1956. (841-846)

were formed with direct links to the 1930s Workers Film Movement and the C.P.G.B. : Stanley Forman's *Plato Films* (1950) and Charles' Cooper's *Contemporary Films* (1951).²⁸⁸ Founded in 1946, the monthly magazine *Film User* became the standard guide to amateur and institutional 16 mm distribution, publishing articles on projection technology and comprehensive reviews of new releases.

The films available ranged from substandard versions of new popular feature film releases to silent classics, comedy, short documentaries, cartoons, experimental film and prizewinning amateur films. From the late 1950s/ early 1960s the back pages of the cine magazines became increasingly peppered with adverts for soft porn marketed as *glamour films* or later *adult films*. Many amateur cinema enthusiasts were also collectors, *Amateur Cine World* frequently ran articles on *classic* cinema and during the mid to late 1950s the then teenage film maker and historian Kevin Brownlow published a series of articles on collecting 9.5 mm prints of rare, international and experimental silent films.

The two dominant modes of amateur film production were, first by clubs/ groups working collectively and sharing resources and second by self sufficient *lone workers*. Both the collective mode of production and the lone worker had the tendency to subvert concepts of 'authorship' since the clubs would frequently share authorship and lone workers would often co-opt friends and family to participate in the collective creation of the film. The primary amateur film form was the *home* movie which *recorded* the domestic and festive life of family and friends for the use of the family and friends. Whilst the cine magazines promoted a diversity of film making practices they acknowledged and celebrated the primacy of the home movie in regular editorials, features and reviews. The most basic, cheapest and accessible type of home movie would simply be unedited

²⁸⁸ Cooper had been involved in the Workers Film Movement as secretary of the Kino group in the mid 1930s. *Contemporary* began as a 16 mm distributor for film societies and clubs specialising in foreign/radical features, but it eventually became a leading 'Art house' cinema distributor/exhibitor of both 35 mm and 16 mm films and ran three major 'Art house' cinemas between the mid 1960s and the mid 1980s: the Paris Pullman and the Phoenix in London and another Phoenix in Oxford. See Margaret Dickinson, *Ibid.* 1999.(P.31-32). And also the interview with Cooper in Margaret Dickinson, *Ibid.* 1999.(P.210-215). *Contemporary* is also listed in *Amateur Cine World* as the distributor of a selection of experimental student films. For links to student film see the review : 'University Students Film' in *Amateur Cine World* Vol.22 No. 9. Jan. 1959. (P. 946-7).

silent footage of actuality, the maker's equipment would be limited to a wide angle lens camera and a projector. But there was within the home movie a wide spectrum of varying degrees of sophistication, A.C.W. often reviewed complex home movies which were planned, scripted and edited, and which used titles, lighting and sound. A constant feature of the cine magazines were articles on how to introduce conventional film techniques into the home movie: how to make holiday films more *dramatic*, how to script and plan a wedding film, how to structure a film around a theme of childhood or lighting techniques for filming a party etc. ²⁸⁹ A recurrent variation of the home movie were narratives in which the family/ friends would *dramatise* themselves. In *Amateur Cine World* October 1955 Peter Bowen described how whilst on holiday with his family he made the prizewinning drama *Low Tide* which features his own son drowning and returning as a ghost :

The family agreed to co-operate but were not very enthusiastic, because I envisaged all of us appearing in the film - and that meant each being prepared to take a hand with the camera where necessary. they urged the advantages of a restful holiday but were persuaded to capitulate..... ²⁹⁰

The narrative hook of the film is that Bowen, playing himself as the father, dreams the drowning incident after falling asleep reading an article on holiday films in *Amateur Cine World*.

Aside from the many permutations of home movie, amateur makers also developed specifically amateur techniques and practices to produce parallel versions of commercial film forms and genres : comedy, drama, crime thrillers, ghost stories, science fiction, newsreels, documentaries, animation, nature films, historical drama, horror. Most significantly in this context, amateurs also made experimental films.

²⁸⁹ A key sub sector of the cine industry was titling equipment and titling services; apart from various lettering systems and special lighting rostrums there were also companies who would shoot film titles to order. And it was also possible to buy ready made all purpose title footage which could be cut into a home movie with titles such as 'Our Holiday', 'Our Family' and 'THE END' etc.. Occasionally the cine magazines would also print home movie titles to cut out and film. See for example Stuart Wynn Jones, 'Summer Summary' in *Amateur Cine World* Vol.22 No. 1 1958 (P.53-57)

²⁹⁰ Peter Bowen 'Putting Drama into the Holiday Film', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.19 No.6. October 1955. (P.554.).

In the 1930s key activists in the various sectors of the Independent movement had hoped that the amateur movement would eventually challenge the cultural dominance of commercial cinema. Throughout the post war period there were numerous initiatives to institutionalise a relationship between the professional film industry and the amateur movement. Many of these initiatives centred on promoting amateur film into the commercial sector, crucially the winners of the annual Amateur Cine World Ten Best awards.²⁹¹ Throughout the period a number of Ten Best films and documentaries about the amateur movement appeared on national television. And yet amateur film never really functioned successfully outside the movement. Certain key amateur activists and makers did move across into the commercial industry, notably the animator Bob Godfrey, the critic and t.v. presenter Philip Jenkinson and the directors Ken Russell, Peter Watkins and Kevin Brownlow.²⁹² Nevertheless, interaction between the amateur movement and the commercial sector was always exceptional. As the movement developed from the 1930s into the post-war period the great majority neither challenged nor sought to challenge the dominance of commercial cinema. Instead the amateur movement developed as a discrete autarkic subculture separated from commercial cinema by a complex set of industrial, technological, institutional and ideological factors. Whilst superficially amateur film and commercial cinema seemed to be correspondent sectors of a broad film culture they were at a deeper level divided by irreconcilable differences.

The prohibitive financial expense of amateur film making ensured that up until at least the early 1960s working class access to the movement was limited. However within a predominant middle/ lower middle class context both post-war cinema

²⁹¹ In 1950 a 35 mm compilation film of four of the Ten Best with documentary material about the amateur movement was released on the commercial cinema circuit as *Filming for Fun* (Dir. Harold Baim). From 1956 screenings of the awards were held at the B.F.I. National Film Theatre and sub standard prints of the winning films were distributed variously by Adventure Films Ltd., Wallace Heaton Ltd., the I.A.C. and the B.F.I. See the article 'Personal Choice' in *Amateur Movie-Maker* No.4, Jan. 1958.(P.24-25)

²⁹² Kevin Brownlow is now best known as a film historian and restorer but was first celebrated for his amateur feature film *It Happened Here* a speculative history of a Nazi invasion of Britain. Brownlow began work on the film when he was eighteen, it took him and his co-director Andrew Mollo seven years to make and it was eventually released for a limited Art house run in 1963. Brownlow and Mollo went on to make a second feature *Winstanley* (1975) an historical drama based on the life of Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers.

and the amateur cine industries targeted the leisure interests of the popular market. But whilst commercial film industry was definitively concerned with the production and promotion of film as theatrical spectacle, the industries competing in the amateur market promoted film as a participant technology. As Michael Chanan observes the unique characteristic of popular cinema as a commodity is that:

...the film does not need to pass physically into the hands of the consumer for its exchange value to be realised. The exchange value of film is realised through its exhibition, which means through the price of admission the viewer pays to see it. This, of course, also allows the film to be consumed collectively, that is, not by the individual but by an audience (whereas the mode of consumption of the gramophone became quickly individual, or at least limited to the household). But if the film does not pass into the ownership of the consumer in order for its exchange value to be realised, nor does it need pass into the ownership of the exhibitor if the exhibitor is prepared to rent it instead. Thus, while goods offered on the capitalist market generally pass from the producer (manufacturer) to the wholesaler to the retailer and thence to the consumer, the terms 'producer', 'distributor', 'exhibitor' and 'audience', which apply to the film industry do not signify quite the same set of relationships, because neither legal ownership of the film nor physical possession have to change hands in the same way. 293

If the development of cinema was driven by the imperative for an integrated form of popular theatrical montage then this must also be understood as the drive for an integrated industrial system for the mass reproduction and distribution of popular theatrical entertainment. The relationship which developed between the popular cinema industry and the audience can be conceptualised as a form of transmission from the various stages of production and distribution to the point of exhibition. Not only is the film never materially exchanged but unlike popular theatre there is relatively no *material* show at the cinema, no travelling company, no actors wages, no props, no costumes, no scenery and no scene changes. The show travels in metal cans ; the light transmitted from a unique montage constructed somewhere else. Whilst the cost of film production is exorbitant, the cost of mass distribution/exhibition is far cheaper than an equivalent live theatrical performance and production cost is offset against the profit from mass ticket sales. The economic durability of the film is only limited by audience demand and the material condition of the print. Competition in this economy of

293 Michael Chanan, *Ibid.* 1980.(P.229)

scale has historically tended towards the increasing inflation of film production budgets and the dominance of Hollywood, since America has always had a vast domestic market. Commercial film production depends upon a legion of subsidiary trade industries to supply professional technology and resources, but this secondary economy is discrete and internal. The financial investment of the industry is ultimately located in the film show and the marketing and publicity surrounding it. The material commodity of popular cinema is essentially the show and the entire system is governed by its exchange value at the point of exhibition. The leisure of the cinema audience is an active engagement with spectacular and glamorous attractions, allegories and adventure ; the show is a convivial utopia, a realm of carnival and justice. The industry has no financial incentive to inform or involve the cinema audience in the industrial and technological production of film, indeed it has every reason to conceal processes which impede the glamour and fluency of the show.

In contrast the leisure of amateur cine was at every level derived from participation in the process of cinematic production. The expansion of the industry and the movement depended upon a reciprocal process of technological innovation and mass marketing which produced relatively cheap and easy-to-use substandard film, cameras, projectors and cine equipment. The industry functioned as a traditional commercial industry supplying cine equipment and substandard film from the manufacturer to the wholesaler to the retailer and on to the consumer, but a simple model of *consumption* is misleading since the leisure activity of the amateur was in itself participation in a form of industrial production. Even amateur cinema enthusiasts who did not make films were not simple *consumers*, rather they were amateur impresarios and projectionists.

Whilst the commercial cinema industry was organised as a variant of the factory system with a hierarchical division of labour and elements of mass production and standardisation, amateur cine was practiced by lone enthusiasts and a range of relatively informal collectives/ groups who produced and exhibited film not as work but as leisure or play. The material product of the amateur cine industry was

cine technology but whilst technology in the commercial industry was primarily limited to its value as industrial utility, the value of cine technology was articulated in a culture of play, memory and desire. In amateur culture, cine technology and technical procedures took on a sensual and arcane pleasure, the amateur maker was no longer a spectator, they became an adept in a magic realm of gadgets, kinks, tips and specifications. ²⁹⁴

Crucially the amateur industry had relatively no direct commercial investment in the production, distribution or exhibition of amateur films. There was limited commercial distribution of prize winning amateur films but this was exceptional. The growth of the industry depended upon the popularity of amateur film production, but the investment of the industry was not in the quality of amateur production but the quantity. Indirectly the cine equipment industry guided and responded to the creative practices of amateur makers through design: camera mobility, hand held shooting, automatic zoom lenses, auto exposure etc. Many articles and advisers in the cine magazines promoted a variation of Hollywood continuity style and an ideology of *professionalism* and *quality* but this was consistently tempered with a pride in self sufficiency, eccentricity and a commitment to experiment. ²⁹⁵ Whilst competition in commercial cinema tended to drive production costs up, competition in the amateur market drove production costs down. Substandard film, reversal film, fast film for shooting in available light, lightweight fixed focus and auto exposure cameras, all these innovations cut the cost of amateur production but they also produced a cinematography radically different to commercial cinema. Commercial cinematography sought a lucid and fluent transparency, an invisible access to the marvellous space of narrative and spectacle. Which is not to say popular

²⁹⁴ This fascination tended towards an ardent loyalty to particular film gauges and techniques which was often disputed in the pages of A.C.W. Conflict often took the form of a complex class struggle; the more money you spent on your technology the closer you could get to the 'professional' standards of the commercial cinema. Accordingly, advocates of 16 mm spurned 8 mm as primitive, whilst 8 mm advocates accused the 16 mm users of elitism. Throughout the 1950s the percentage of 8 mm entries to the A.C.W. Ten Best rose steadily and yet this increase was not represented in the overall winners which were consistently dominated by 16 mm, and this under representation aroused an ongoing controversy in the A.C.W. about aesthetics, technology and the nature of amateurism. See for example 'A Special Class for 8 mm ?' in *Amateur Cine World* Vol.21. No.4. August 1957. (P.329.).

²⁹⁵ For a defence of experimental film see 'Comment on Competitions', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.21. No.6. November 1957. (P.563.).

cinematography sustained a perpetual Naturalistic illusion, but that it was increasingly driven by an aspiration to conventionally simulate the perceptual quality of the human eye: the elimination of photographic grain, controlled exposure, constant focus, smooth movement, stable framing, colour grading etc. This drive towards clarity eventually produced the modern cinematic attraction which we could term *hyper lucidity* a form of cinematography which idealises the perception of the human eye : deep focus, increased colour saturation, digital effects etc. In comparison amateur cinematography, especially 8 mm cinematography, is translucent or opaque. It is visible, the screen image does not seem natural or fluent but is composed of photographic grain which in 8 mm appears to vibrate. Since the amateur often worked with only one reversal print the final film would also often become scratched and dirty. Moreover, even the best amateur editing equipment tended to make edits visible or projectors jump. The small lightweight cine cameras could be hand held by a single operator without a crew, technical support or tripods, dollies and other heavy equipment. Amateurs carried their cameras on holiday, to the beach, to festivals and celebrations, in cars, boats, rambling, climbing etc. The transparency of commercial cinematography is also an objectification, a distance composed in framing and movement. In contrast the home movie style is physically produced by the subjectivity of the maker, it is always a point of view shot ; in the hands of the maker the camera shakes and jerks, they follow movement, they *hose pipe* pan along the horizon, their friends make eye contact through the lens and when the maker loses interest they abruptly cut. Add to all these factors occasional mistakes in exposure and focusing, and the experience of watching amateur cinematography alternates between a consciousness of film as an analogue and the impression of gazing through a vibrating mesh into an intangible world. Commercial cinema invokes an immediate and lucid present whilst amateur cine is always an invocation of the past. The irony is that because amateur cinematography cannot hide the marks of its own production and because it was traditionally used to document the everyday life of the home, it came to connote authenticity ; popular cinema's *realism* connotes fiction whilst amateur cine's fabrication connotes the real.

Although sound equipment became available in the mid 1930s amateur cinema was established and expanded on the availability of substandard silent prints.²⁹⁶ After the war the vast increase in the use of 16 mm sound projectors and the mass production of sound prints severely undermined the availability of new silent prints, but many enthusiasts remained committed to silent film and became collectors and advocates. Amateur film making developed a broad range of techniques to produce post-production film soundtracks but the critical obstacle for the amateur movement was developing a cheap and effective synchronised sound system. The development of the magnetic stripe system for 8 mm and Super 8 in the late 1960s, came very close to solving the problem but there always remained fundamental problems with editing striped film. The combined effect of these factors was that amateur cine was always predominantly a visual form which used music, commentary and other unsynchronised sound as post-production augmentation. This visual dominance was fundamental to the home movie which was essentially concerned with visual memory and documentation. The audience for the home movie would invariably be the family and friends of the film maker and synchronised sound would have been superfluous to the images of holidays, children, deceased relatives, old houses, beloved pets etc. Moreover, dialogue would have interfered with the active audience conversation during the film.²⁹⁷ Amateur cine was also short, most amateur films ran under 20 minutes, few over half an hour and feature length films were very unusual. The conditions of amateur production imposed both brevity and speed on the amateur maker. Film stock and processing was expensive and so amateurs could not afford long films, long takes and multiple takes, most cine equipment was designed for short film and the vast majority of amateurs had to find time for film making between work and domestic duties. Moreover, since film production in the amateur movement was a leisure activity engaged predominantly with family documentation and social interaction there was a fundamental preference for short films frequently produced and screened as part of a process of continuous social interaction.

²⁹⁶ See 'Equipment, Materials, Technical Developments, Services' (uncredited) *Amateur Cine World* Vol.19 No.1. May 1955. (P.40.).

²⁹⁷ See for instance H.A. Postlethwaite, 'What's the Date ?' *Amateur Cine World* . Vol. 20. No.1 May 1956 (P.43)

Amateur industry and technology was essentially different to commercial cinema. The products were different and the technologies and working practices were incompatible. Furthermore, this dichotomy polarised in the post-war period. From the 1950s onwards amateur technology became increasingly automated and simplified whilst commercial cinema remained the domain of highly trained technicians and specialists. Amateur film remained predominantly silent whilst commercial cinema became increasingly invested in sync sound technologies, and commercial silent film was consigned to the archives. Amateur film was short whilst increasingly the supporting programme of short films at the cinema was phased out until they were effectively eliminated in the 1970s. These factors ensured that amateur work and amateur skills were not directly transferable to the commercial cinema industry. Neither the commercial film industry, the television industry or the film unions were actively hostile to amateur makers or the amateur movement but *amateurism* was absolutely excluded from the commercial film industry which in combination with the unions maintained strict professional standards governing *quality* of product, hierarchical division of labour, technical specialisation, wage differentials etc. As it developed the television industry adopted even more rigid standards but it was also potentially more accessible to amateur film making since it used the 16 mm gauge and screened short film. However, the concept of *broadcast quality* effectively excluded amateur work, specifically 8 mm and Super 8 mm film from transmission, unless it was clearly framed and identified as an example of amateur film making, an exception to the professional norm.

The leisure at the core of the amateur movement was complex for not only was the practice valued as leisure but it was used in home movies to *record* and *store* leisure time. Home movies captured the festive life and made it possible to replay that life as a participant spectacle. This had a particular significance for summer and foreign holidays since the expense of the holiday and the fleeting time out of work could be materialised and owned as a form of external memory; the light of summer could be projected into the dark winter nights. Likewise childhood time and the rituals of family life could be captured and reviewed. Whereas stills

photography provided family and friends with documents of the past, home movies invoked the past as a spectacle of recollection. ²⁹⁸ Each film was unique, celebrated in the conversation and recollection of its audience and yet to strangers they all seem to repeat the same formula, the same babies, couples, grandparents, weddings...For the stranger the home movie is often meaningless, or worse it is a memory that has lost its home. But home movies also fixed leisure time in the glamour of cinema, they invoked the narrative and attraction of popular cinema, they cinematised the lives of the enthusiasts who became the directors and stars of their own lives and this glamorisation was promoted by the amateur cine industry. ²⁹⁹

The key issues concerning the amateur movement in a history of Underground Cinema are alternativity and experimentalism. If we sidestep the predominance of home movies and focus on the active movement engaged at club and competition level, it must be estimated that the post war amateur movement achieved a level of organised integrated national production, exhibition and distribution which surpassed the Avant-Garde and Independent film movement of the 1970s and 1980s. And yet, unlike these later formations, the amateur movement remained economically and institutionally autonomous to the commercial film industry, television, State education, academic institutions and the institutions of Art. Paradoxically, the obscurity of the movement is the most convincing evidence of its autonomy. Institutionally the amateur movement did not register and it is the institutions which authorise history. The assumption which underlies the omission of the post-war amateur movement from histories of Independent film and video is that amateur cine is neither cinema nor Art and it is precisely this which makes amateurism alternative.

Two key markers of amateur cine as an alternative film culture were first the position of women and second collective production. It is clear from a close reading of the cine magazines that women were intrinsic to the amateur

²⁹⁸ This argument draws on Don Macpherson's paraphrasing of Stephen Heath in Don Macpherson, *Amateur Films : Introduction* in Don Macpherson (ed.) *Ibid.* 1980. (P.194-195.).

²⁹⁹ For a remarkable example see 'A Novel Idea From America', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.10 No.9. Autumn 1946. (P.437).

movement, they were members of cine clubs, they shared the work with male members and there was a significant percentage of women makers. ³⁰⁰ Women makers frequently featured in club reports, features and correspondence on amateur activity, there were often images of women makers using cameras and projectors and occasionally there were articles opposing the male domination of the amateur movement and encouraging women's involvement at both grass roots and management level. ³⁰¹

Collectivity and participation were fundamental to cine culture. Despite many funding initiatives and speculations, amateur production effectively operated outside of both the commercial film industry and the amateur cine industry and so remained overwhelmingly a self funded voluntary activity which functioned by the amicable consent and generosity of its participants. This voluntary and collective character also structured amateur cinema screenings and most other club activities since they were effectively non-profit making organisations which held all resources in common ownership. A.C.W. functioned as a co-ordinating centre and clearing house for shared information, debate and collective decision making and there was a frequent and ongoing series of letters and articles which detailed how to construct d.i.y. cine equipment and so evade and subvert the cine equipment industry. Innovative collective projects frequently appeared in the post-war cine magazines, A.C.W. May 17th 1962 has an article on the production and exhibition of a collectively made two hour 8 mm documentary film called *A River Runs Through Our Town* made by Shoreham Cine Club of West Sussex. ³⁰²

The club shows and home screenings of amateur cinema reproduced the attractions of early British cinema but they also developed new attractions. They

³⁰⁰ A particular celebrity maker who frequently featured in the cine magazines in the late 1950s was the popular black boogie-woogie pianist Winifred Atwell who together with her husband specialised in 16 mm travel and wildlife films. See D.M. Phythian, 'Round-the-World Record', *Amateur Movie-Maker* No.4. Jan. 1958. (P.33-34) The black tennis star Althea Gibson was also noted as an amateur maker in *Amateur Cine World* Vol. 21 No.4 August 1957. (P.329.)

³⁰¹ See for instance Leslie Wood, 'Wanted: Cine Suffragettes', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.14 No.10. February 1951. (P.993-997.). Iris Fayde, 'Woman's Viewpoint', *Amateur Cine World* Vol. 15. No. 10 February 1952. (P.1019-1020/1039-1040.) and *Amateur Cine World* Vol. 20 No.7. November 1956. (P.668.).

³⁰² Alan Gill, 'The Longest Little Show on Earth', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.27 No.20 May 17th 1962. (P.776-777)

were familiar, they allowed their participants to watch themselves and to glamorise and narrate everyday life. And it was alternative, it didn't look like commercial cinema, it looked like someone had made it, like you could make it yourself ; for its participants amateur cinema opened up the creative potential of early cinema before the development of continuity narrative techniques. However, if amateur makers aspired to the continuity techniques of commercial cinema they also had to learn them by experiment.

Throughout the post-war decades the amateur movement had both a current of experimental practice and an awareness of the experimental tradition as a crucial element of amateur film culture. The pages of the cine magazines are full of experiments, scripts and ideas for films, d.i.y. equipment projects, advice on how to achieve cinematographic effects and letters from makers detailing their own discoveries. There would frequently be articles on various types of animation: cartoons, claymation, pixillation etc. And occasionally, there would be features on how to achieve abstract animation effects.³⁰³ A direct link between amateur experiment and the 1930s Avant-Garde was the film maker, novelist and poet Oswald Blakeston who wrote a standard paperback guide on how to write scripts for amateur films in 1949, and contributed a series of his own scripts to A.C.W. in the early 1950s.³⁰⁴ These were designed for amateurs to make themselves, and the most striking is the surreal *Material for a Poem* which appears in the issue for November 1951.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ For instance, in *Amateur Cine World* February 1952 there is an article detailing how to construct a rostrum mounted kaleidoscope for the creation of infinite symmetrical patterning and in *Amateur Cine World* December 1957, the animator Stuart Wynn Jones details techniques for drawing images directly onto 16 mm film and how to compose music by drawing directly onto the optical soundtrack. See respectively 'Soundtrack, Running Commentary: Kaleidoscope', *Amateur Cine World* Vol. 15. No. 10 February 1952. (P.1005.) and Stuart Wynn Jones, 'Cartooning Without A Camera', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.21.No.8. December 1957 (P.782-785/826.).

³⁰⁴ See Oswald Blakeston, *How To Script Amateur Films*, Focal Press, London. 1949.

³⁰⁵ In the brief introduction Blakeston explains that the script is for an 'art' film and that it takes as its form a dream state which, he observes, is very suitable for the amateur since it does not require strict continuity. The narrative that follows is an anguished lament for a Bohemian poet, heavily influenced by French Surrealist film but also integrating post-war atomic bomb anxiety. It would be fascinating to discover just how many readers of A.C.W. actually attempted to make Blakeston's script. there could be a score of amateur Surrealist 'classics' gathering dust in suburban lofts. Oswald Blakeston, 'Material for A Poem', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.14 No.10. February 1951. (P.997-1001.).

The club news in A.C.W. regularly noted screenings of experimental films at various regional centres, many pre-war silent experimental films were still available on substandard gauges including work from the French Avant-Garde, silent Soviet film and German Expressionist cinema. And the work of the British Documentary movement, Len Lye and Norman McLaren was known and discussed in A.C.W. From the mid 1950s the amateur maker and activist Derek Hill and the experimental amateur cine club the Grasshopper Group organised screenings and distribution of contemporary American experimental work including films by Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Willard Maas and Marie Menken. ³⁰⁶ Work by the Grasshopper Group was also distributed in the U.S. by Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 distribution group. A.C.W. for December 1956 has a feature recommending films for public amateur screenings which includes an experimental section, and the entire selection includes around eight experimental shorts including three films by James Broughton and five by British makers including Lindsay Anderson's *O Dreamland*. ³⁰⁷

In the late 1950s experimental film became a source of intense interest and controversy in A.C.W.. For example in the issue for October 1957 an editorial article defends the magazine from attacks by both those for, and against experimental entries to the Ten Best Awards. In the July 1958 issue there is an editorial report from the Brussels Experimental Film festival which mentions work by Stan Brakhage, Shirley Clarke, Len Lye, Francis Thompson, John Whitney, and Roman Polansky. And in the January 1959 issue there is a two page review of experimental film at the annual University of London Student Film Festival. ³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ See 'Controversy Corner' in *Amateur Cine World* Vol.21 No.2. June 1957. (P.171.).

³⁰⁷ 'Programme Building for Public Shows', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.20. No. 8. December 1956. (P. 840/856) The attitude of A.C.W. to Free Cinema was almost entirely enthusiastic, the six programmes of films held at the N.F.T. cinema between 1956 and 1959 were extensively featured and discussed. What is most significant is that A.C.W. initially celebrated Free Cinema as a vindication and outstanding example of amateur film making despite the fact that all of the films in the first programme were produced by the B.F.I. Experimental Film Fund.

³⁰⁸ See respectively 'Comment on Competitions', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.21 No.6. October 1957.(P.563). 'What Does It All Mean?', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.22 . No.3. July 1958.(P.245-247). 'University Students Film', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.22 No. 9. January 1959. (P. 946-7).

Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s intriguing references to experimental amateur production frequently appeared in the club pages and articles of A.C.W.

³⁰⁹ A series of experimental films won prizes in the Ten Best awards including in 1953 *Agib and Agab* (Markfilm), *Floral Fantasy* (John Daborn), *Two's Company* (the Grasshopper Group), in 1954 *Coming Shortly* (High Wycome Film Society), in 1955 *Doppelganger* (Solo Films) and in 1956 *Driftwood and Seashell* (Richard H. Jobson) and *Short Spell* (Stuart Wynn Jones). Markfilm, who made *Agib and Agab* were a group of four Artists who produced several experimental amateur films in the early 1950s, the group included Bruce Lacey who later became a key figure in the 1960s Counterculture, as a performer, an installation Artist and member of the notorious radical jazz combo The Alberts. ³¹⁰ The most consistent, organised and celebrated amateur experimental film makers were the Grasshopper Group founded by John Daborn, which included at various times, Derek Hill, Bob Godfrey and Stuart Wynn Jones. They specialised in animation and experiment but otherwise operated as a regular open membership cine club holding screenings, training sessions, open nights etc. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s the group produced a score of prizewinning experimental films and organised screenings and distribution of American and continental experimental film. Derek Hill was a film maker and journalist who from the early 1950s wrote film reviews and features for A.C.W. In the late 1950s he set up the Short Film Service to distribute short films to clubs, societies and the commercial circuit and in the mid 1960s he founded the New Cinema Club, which along with the London Film Makers Co-Op (L.F.M.C.), and the Electric Cinema Club in Notting Hill Gate, was a key venue for the London Underground Cinema. Another direct link between the amateur movement and the Underground was Jeff Keen the most influential Underground film maker in the British tradition. In 1962 Tony Wiggins

the editor of Cine Camera magazine met Raymond Barker and Jeff Keen and

³⁰⁹ A long running series of items followed the making of the abstract film ballet, *Between Two Worlds*, by the Oxford Experimental Film Group in the early 1950s. See for example Derrick Knight, 'We Found A New Idea', *Amateur Cine World* Vol. 15. No. 10 February 1952. (P.991-994/1018.) In August 1957 a short item referred to a group called Camera Obscura Experimental Films working in Blackheath, SE3. who were experimenting with double exposure of film to create 'a kind of cinematic spirit writing'. See 'Experimental', *Amateur Cine World* Vol. 21. No. 4 August 1957. (P.367.) And in November 1958 a full page article reviews the work of two obscure experimental makers and laments that it is very unlikely that anyone will ever see their work. Jack Smith, 'Flights of Fancy', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.22. No.7. November 1958. (P.671.)

³¹⁰ See for instance Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, Paladin, London. 1970.(P.117.)

viewed some of the 8 mm films they had been making around the Art College in Brighton.³¹¹ He was so inspired by the Brighton films that he organised a programme to tour the cine club circuit called the Experimental Film Register, which was launched at the Grasshopper Group in December 1962. Keen was actually working as a Brighton Corporation gardener at the time but was making his films at the college film society. He had made his first film *Wail* in 1959, and in 1961 had collaborated on *Autumn Feast* with Piero Heliczer who later became a key film maker, performer and poet of the New York Underground.³¹² The Experimental Film Register ran for a couple of years and then disappeared when *Cine Camera* magazine ceased publication. Keen was eventually recognised and celebrated by the Co-Op activists and attained a unique position of reverence in the 70s Avant-Garde, for even at the height of the Structuralist dogma when his work was sidelined, it still seemed to defy condemnation. Perhaps this was because the Structuralists knew that he had been making Underground films a decade before the return of the Avant-Garde, or perhaps it was because they understood, that as convincing and esoteric as their Theory was, it still stood no chance against the sheer power of Keen's psychedelic barrage of pop montage.

Although there are direct links between the amateur movement and the Underground the essential continuity is cultural and comprehensive. Despite its gadget fetish and fascination with arcane technical procedure, the amateur movement consistently sought the democratisation of film culture, popular access to film technology, personal participation and collective production. At a fundamental level it was an experimental culture since every amateur maker was engaged in a personal, playful and inquisitive exploration of the medium. As the cost of amateur cine equipment dropped in the 1950s and early 1960s the movement also became a genuinely popular culture, and at the height of its popularity it was the most successful integrated autonomous film movement in British cinema history. Moreover, the Underground Cinema movement of late

³¹¹ Tony Wigans, 'Not To Be Shown in Public', *8 mm Magazine* Vol.7 No.7. December 1968. (P.50-51.)

³¹² Heliczer also organised happenings with the Velvet Underground and ran the Dead Language Press which published the limited edition *Beautiful Book* (1962), a collection of photographs by the definitive Underground star, Jack Smith.

1950s effectively developed as an amateur movement : the alternativity of the Underground was substantially determined by the alternativity of amateur technology and technique.

And yet the 1970s British Avant-Garde and the Independent Film and Video sector never acknowledged the priority of the amateur movement. The reasons for this are complex, to begin with the key activists of the Avant Garde knew very little about amateur cine culture and they despised popular cinema. They were predominantly Artists , most of whom had never made a film until joining the L.F.M.C. and they were initially engaged with a Counterculture which sought a revolutionary negation of British post-war culture ; the square repressed suburban world of their bourgeois parents. The overwhelming influence for British Underground cinema was American Underground film and the American Counterculture. In this context the amateur movement must have seemed a banal and provincial hobby for aging squares, or worse still an ideological prop for the repressive capitalist patriarchal family. Whilst the amateur movement was diverse and diffuse with no central ideological core or Theoretical consciousness, the Avant-Garde formed around a Theoretical praxis essentially hostile to the popular, and in the 1970s the Independent Film and Video sector reinforced this neglect with a State Socialist disdain for leisure and dilettantism.

Nevertheless, the amateur movement was aware of the Underground. A.C.W. of June 30 th 1966 carried a four page feature on American Underground Cinema under the headline *What are Underground Movies ?* A month later the magazine reported that anyone interested in hiring the films should contact the new London Film-Maker's Co-Op. ³¹³

³¹³ See Camille Cook, 'What are Underground Movies ?', *Amateur Cine World* Vol.11 No.26 June 30 th 1966 (P.876- 879) and *Amateur Cine World*, August 4th 1966 (P.149) respectively.

Section C : The Search For the Cool Place :

Underground Cinema vs. Avant Garde Film

This final section will integrate the Underground Cinema movement into the history of the Pop/ Art conflict as the emergence of a radical hybrid subculture.

Chapter eight will commence by examining the heroic but failed attempts of the radical Anti-Artists of Dada/Surrealism to free themselves from the bourgeois institution of Art. It will conclude by tracing the conception of the Bohemian realm of late 19th century Paris, and by arguing that the Bohemian cabaret must be considered a prototype for Underground Cinema.

Chapter nine describes the radical collision, fusion and mutation of popular culture and Anti- Art in post war America, and tracks this hybridisation through Beat culture, to the Counterculture and the advent of Underground Cinema.

Chapter ten tracks the formation and progress of the British Underground cinema from the founding of the London Film makers Co-Op to the suppression of the Underground, the rise of the Structural Avant Garde, the new Independent Film movement and the nationalisation of experimental film and video.

Throughout this text there are integrated references to the historical development of radical Cultural Theory. Chapter eleven convokes this history and argues first, that the development of Cultural Theory was a critical site of the conflict between Art and the popular, and second that the socially radical strategies developed by the leading Cultural Theorists were fatally flawed by their failure to theorise their own complicity in that conflict.

Chapter twelve investigates the theoretical and industrial institutionalisation of experimental film and video in the mid 1970s through a trinity of classic texts by David Curtis, Peter Gidal and Peter Wollen respectively.

Chapter thirteen charts the spectacular resurfacing of Underground Cinema from the New York Cinema of Transgression in the 1980s, to the Exploding Cinema and the British Underground Cinema of the 1990s.

Finally, the resolution of this thesis rejects Postmodernity as the latest Art strategy to suppress the popular, and celebrates a new popular and subversive poetics for the Underground.

Chapter Eight

Anti-Art, Pop and Bohemia: the Bohemian Cabaret as Precursor to the Underground Cinema.

The emergence of Underground Cinema in the second half of the 1950s has its roots in the friction between Art and the popular which began with the very advent of Art in the early 19th century. Whilst the institution of Art developed as a means to maintain the reconfigured bourgeois social hierarchy this doesn't mean that there were no agents or movements within the realm of Art dedicated to radical politics and revolutionary agitation. On the contrary the historical development of Art as a repressive institution must be understood as a product of the negation and containment of these radical forces. The three interlinked and initially radical traditions which developed from the formation of Art were the Avant-Garde, Anti-Art and Bohemianism, and the crucial foundation of these traditions was French Romanticism.

This chapter will track the development of these currents to the emergence of the Bohemian cabaret in the Paris of the 1880s.

The function of Art is to demonstrate, circumscribe and preserve the power and freedom of the bourgeoisie. Romanticism is the primary form of Art, it is the shift from feudal prestige to bourgeois aura, the advent of the alienated genius. French Romanticism appears with the restoration of Louis XVIII, it is the Revolution invoked and betrayed. The accession of the bourgeoisie at once destroys the

feudal hierarchy and then fetishises it as the acquisition of the new ruling class; the feudal king is replaced by the bourgeois king. ³¹⁴ Romanticism is the sensibility of the new historical time of bourgeois capitalism, of the possibility of an egalitarian democratic utopia and of the betrayal of this possibility by the bourgeoisie. It is a complex system of interdependent cultural formations, tendencies and determinants, it is irrational and progressive ; it Romanticises the world. At its core is the paradoxical desire for utopia and the fear and suppression of that desire. From Romanticism the Avant-Garde developed as the pioneers of a utopian realm free from the utility, commodification and alienation of bourgeoisie capitalism. But far from establishing a new alternative realm this trajectory effectively secluded Art as an elite fetish and imposed on the Avant-Garde Artist the role of the outcast genius martyr.

By the early 20th century it had become apparent to politically radical Artists that the utopian project of the Avant-Garde was fatally misconceived and from this recognition a reconfigured utopian Art project developed; this was Anti-Art and it was consolidated by the Dadaists. Anti-Art is a project which becomes possible only when Art has become institutionalised as a culture which is nominally autonomous to social function, industrial production, capitalist economics and popular culture. After Art for Art's Sake, after Modernism, after the carnage of the Great War of 1914-18, Art had developed its institutional *autonomy* to the degree, that its political irrelevance was irrevocably revealed. More than that, the Dadaists realised that this autonomy was in fact the complicity of Art with the bourgeois war machine and a means to enervate radical dissent. ³¹⁵ Before Dada there had been scores of Artists and Art movements who were revolutionary socialists and anarchist activists, but until the Dadaists, revolutionary Artists had set out to transform Art, to create a new Art for the people, an Art with a social function, an

³¹⁴ See Henri Saint-Simon, (1823), *On the Intermediate (Bourgeois) Class* from Henri Saint Simon, *Selected Writings on Science, Industry and Social Organisation*, Keith Taylor (ed.) , Croom Helm, London. 1975. (P.250-251.)

³¹⁵ See for instance Huelsenbeck, Richard .(1922) *En Avant Dada* from *The Dada Painters and Poets* ed. Motherwell,R. George Wittenborn Inc., New York. 1951. (P.44)

Art of liberation. ³¹⁶ The Dadaists also invoked a new revolutionary culture, but understood that it could not be Art, there was only one revolutionary project for the radical Artist : self abolition. Art had to be destroyed so that its utopian potential could be released. Anti-Art demands the end of autonomy and the reintegration of Art and everyday life : the sublation of Art. ³¹⁷

Art as an institution consists of production, distribution/ exhibition and ideological apparatus and within these overlapping sectors are the Artists, galleries, patrons, the public, the market, educational sector, museums, State Art organisations etc. The interaction and diversity of Art activity prohibits a rigid allocation to agents in the institution; an Artist may also be a teacher, a Theorist, a curator and a collector. However Art has integrity as a complex functioning institutional system. The production of aura as a commodity, the development of the Artist as the producer of aura and the removal of function from objects is not simply an historical process , it is what Art does as a functioning system. The paradox of a feudal handicraft in an industrial society and a mystic ritual in the age of scientific rationalism makes Art both mythically fascinating and vulnerable to subversion, Dada realised this and exploited it. In the years between the two world wars Art appeared to be most vulnerable to subversion at the point where the aesthetic gaze was summoned, where the ritual took place , the site of exhibition; the gallery, the theatre, the concert hall etc. Those who attend an exhibition enter into a compact with the exhibitor : the exhibition will provide the auratic objects, the audience will gaze with pure aesthetic disinterest. Bathed in the aura, social being is suspended and the aesthetic gaze interrogates the Art object for *meaning* ; the aura, the trace of the Artist, form, style, connotation, denotation, symbolism, allegory, metaphor etc. This conversion of social function into meaning renders the Art object *insignificant* ; it is a complex and exclusive game ³¹⁸ . Dada's most radical strategy was also its fatal flaw : rather than trying to win or refusing to play the game of Art, Dada entered the game but broke the rules. They subverted

³¹⁶ For example the contemporaneous Italian Futurist movement had amongst its number the anarchists Russolo and Boccioni, whilst amongst the Russian Futurists Mayakovsky's involvement in revolutionary communism began at the age of fourteen. See also .D.D. Egbert Ibid.(P. 274-5)

³¹⁷ Peter Bürger . Ibid 1984. (P.22-58).

³¹⁸ Bourdieu. Ibid. 1986 (P.54-55.)

the auratic realm of Art by inserting objects into it which were not Art : popular culture, mechanically reproduced images, mass produced objects, anonymous work, mundane functional appliances, found objects etc. Perhaps the most notorious example was the mass produced porcelain urinal signed by R. Mutt and sent to the hanging committee of the 1917 exhibition of the New York Society of Independent Artists ; Marcel Duchamp taking the piss.

This barrage of non-Art was designed to expose Art as a bourgeois fetish and at first it was very effective, but with each new outrage Art did not disintegrate, it actually became more resistant. As Hans Richter recalls :

The devising and raising of public hell was an essential function of any Dada movement, whether its goal was pro-art, non-art, or anti-art. And when the public, like insects or bacteria, had developed immunity to one kind of poison, we had to think of another. ³¹⁹

In its brief and glorious rage the Dada movement developed a repertoire of brilliant subversive techniques , but they also initiated an historic dialectic which far from eliminating Art effectively vaccinated it against subversion, modernised its technology and expanded and liberated the functionless gaze. How this happened lies in the arcane nature of Art as an auratic ritual and the Artist as the producer of aura. The function (lessness) of Art is to maintain the social hierarchy of the bourgeoisie and this maintenance is performed at every level of the Art Institution from the ritual of exhibition to Art education and magazine criticism. The only place where this maintenance does not take place is in the *content* of the Art work, because the aesthetic gaze renders the Art work itself insignificant. By opening the rift between signifier and signified, by eliminating representation, the Modernists ratified what became apparent to the Dadaists : it doesn't actually matter what the Art work is, because the institution of Art is autonomous to the work of Art. This is the incredible resilience of Art, it cannot be subverted at the level of the artwork. The shock tactics of Dada produced ever diminishing effects, every attempt to break into the aesthetic gaze of the bourgeois audience simply increased their capacity for disinterest in the face of extreme provocation. The absurd and irrational excesses of the Dadaists may have outraged the bourgeoisie

³¹⁹ Richter. H. , *Dada : Art and Anti-Art*. McGraw -Hill, New York .1966.(P.35)

at first, but inevitably such extremism could be contained as the sacred and noble mythology of religious ecstasy and aristocratic eccentricity : aura. Moreover since the bourgeoisie articulates itself as a the ruling elite by the disinterest of its aesthetic gaze, so Dada provided ever more efficient tests of disinterest. The insertion of mass produced objects, new technology, random products and vulgar humanity into the institution of Art did not destroy aura but *modernised* it. The irony of Dada was that to many of its activists, Anti-Art was just another Art movement, another Avant- Garde , so that even as they subverted Art they participated in the institutionalisation of that subversion.³²⁰ Ever since the primordial Romantic genius emerged out of the bourgeois revolution the life of the Artist had become the authority of the aura, but up until Dada the aura was experienced by the viewer as the authenticity of the handmade Art work, the fetish of the mystical and noble. The institutionalisation of Dada removed the aura from the Art work and projected it back onto the Artist and this projection was often encouraged by the Dadaists.³²¹ The revolutionary potential of inserting non-Art into the Art institution became totally assimilated as the *found object* and the *Ready Made* and aura could subsequently be experienced no longer as simply the physical trace of the Artist but as the mystic projection of the Artist's perception. Whereas the Artist had hitherto had the power to produce aura, after the Ready Made the Artist became living aura , able to transubstantiate the base and vulgar objects of everyday life into Art simply by placing them into the Art institution.

From Dada an Anti-Art tradition developed which can be traced through the 20th century from the Surrealists to the Lettrists, the Situationists, Fluxus, Conceptual Art, the mail artists and contemporary Art hoaxers, pranksters and interventionists. Since Dada Anti-Art has been locked into a relentless shadow

conflict with the institution of Art in which the Anti-Artists have developed ever

³²⁰ This is specifically the charge that the radical Huelsenbeck levels at Tzara in his essay 'Dada Lives' of (1936) quoted in Home.S. , *The Assault on Culture* , Aporia Press, London 1988. (P.5)

³²¹ A crucial exponent of this appropriation was Duchamp who wrote of the work Fountain (1917) , which he had exhibited under the name Mr Mutt : 'Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance , He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view-created a new thought for that object.' Quoted in Tomkins .C. (1962), *Ahead of the Game*. Penguin Books Ltd. London. 1968.(P.42- 43)

more ingenious and resistant subversive strategies and Art has proved itself ever more flexible and efficient in its process of enervation and appropriation. This dialectic is inevitable since in the final analysis Anti-Art as a radical project can only operate within the autonomous institution of Art; Anti-Art is always Art. ³²²

Dada/Surrealism was historically the most radical form of Anti-Art, after Dada/Surrealism, Anti-Art became a new Avant-Garde. ³²³ Moreover the Anti-Art desire for the sublation of Art was always and essentially politically equivalent to the Avant-Garde desire for autonomy ; it is the Artist's desire for an aesthetic utopia which will bring an end to bourgeois alienation. In the first case by creating the utopian realm of Art outside bourgeois society and in the second by eliminating the exclusivity of Art and so attempting to extend the utopian realm out to every class and division of society. Although Anti-Art deployed elements of popular culture as a subversive non-Art, both the Avant-Garde and Anti-Art projects were ultimately predicated on the negation of the popular. The Modernist Avant-Garde sought to purge Art of all trace of the popular whilst the Anti-Art movement transformed the popular into Art. The utopian project of Anti-Art effectively became the demand for the aesthetisation of popular life, a trajectory which was exemplified by the Situationists active in Paris from the late 1950' and into the late 1960s. In Situationism the ambivalent enmity and desire of the Artist for the popular reaches its most fervent and seductive polarity ; the popular is conceived as both the totalising hegemonic domain of bourgeois oppression and the base metal for the alchemical transformations of Avant-Garde liberation.

³²² As the Fluxus Artist Allan Kaprow observed in 1969: 'Art. There's the catch. At this stage of consciousness, the sociology of Culture emerges as an in-group "dumb-show". Its sole audience is a roster of the creative and performing professions watching itself, as if in a mirror, enact a struggle between self-appointed priests and a cadre of self-appointed commandos, jokers, guttersnipes, and triple agents who seems to be attempting to destroy the priests' church. But everybody knows how it all ends: in church, of course, with the whole club bowing their heads and muttering prayers. They pray for themselves and for their religion.' Allan Kaprow, 'Education of the Un-Artist' (1971) from Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Life and Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley. 1993.(P.103).

³²³ Key points of my argument in this section were conceived in opposition to the work of Andreas Huyssen in his collection of essays *After the Great Divide*. See specifically Andrea Huyssen, 'The Hidden Dialectic' (1980) reprinted in Andrea Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, Macmillan Press, London. 1988..

The Avant-Garde operates in all its forms as the vanguard of the autonomy of the institution of Art, this is an imperative of the ruling culture of the bourgeoisie which represses, appropriates and enervates all radical projects designed to democratise and liberate cultural production. It is a paradox which is infinitely flexible and infinitely transformable, it is a product of the bourgeois fetishisation of both the feudal past and the capitalist future ; with progress it makes new cultural developments old. ³²⁴ The Avant-Garde cannot be simply identified as a specific historical formation, movement or *genius*, and neither can it be identified by *content* since the autonomy of Art is not a style, form or medium but a social function. Although the *purest* expression of the Avant-Garde is Modernist abstraction, *content* is superfluous, even cultural work that was designed as radical Anti-Art can be appropriated and transformed into Avant-Garde Art, even those who have worked explicitly for the democratisation of culture have had their work appropriated by the Avant-Garde. The only requirement of content is that it should be *new*, and since in a society ruled by an elite caste, the idea of democracy and liberation is always *new*, those radical cultural workers who chose to work within the institution of Art will always serve the Avant-Garde; the more they rebel the more they collaborate in their own superfluousness. The Dada liberation of the aura, the transference from the hand to the soul of the Artist, enabled the 20th century Avant-Garde to colonise new cultures and technologies without ever risking the reintegration of Art and everyday life, because since the Art work was no longer defined by its materiality but by inclusion in the institution of Art, so aura could be bestowed on *anything* .

The Anti-Art separation of the aura from the object accelerated a process of European Avant-Garde colonial cultural appropriation exemplified by the well documented influence of Japanese woodcuts on the Impressionists and African masks on the Cubists. But the first colony and the primary appropriation was the

³²⁴ So effective is this arcane enchantment that Art has now entered a radical new phase of autonomy in which cultural practices formerly considered as Art are now being separated and excluded from Art by the creation of ultra superfluous substitutes : theatre is no longer Art since the emergence of *Performance Art* and *Live Art* , music is replaced by *Sound Art* and *Radio Art* etc. (The substitute for cinema we shall come to soon enough). The last autonomy will be of Art from its specialisation as a 'visual art', then perhaps there will be *Paint Art*, *Artists Painting* and *Sculpture Art*.

internal colony of all those in western society who were excluded from Art as it became autonomous ; the popular.

The Avant-Garde and Anti-Art should be understood as historical projects operating within the culture of Art, in comparison Bohemia should be understood as a broader subculture which contained and produced Artists and Art movements but which operated at the border of Art and the popular.

Bakhtin cites the carnival as a crucial agent in the rise of Renaissance humanism and tracks elements of carnival culture into Romanticism. However, neither the Renaissance or Romanticism were isolated junctures, they were actually critical phases in the gradual ascension of bourgeois culture, and the popular was a vital factor in that ascension. The Romantic movement first constituted itself in fascination with the life of the people : the appropriation of popular forms (ballads, melodrama etc.) , grotesque carnival imagery, the mythologised feudal countryside, the idealisation of the outlaw and the revolutionary utopian currents of socialism and anarchy.³²⁵ However, the resurgence of Carnavalesque themes and forms in Romanticism is not the return of carnival, it is a new element which could only develop because carnival had been excluded from Classicism. In the struggle against feudalism the bourgeoisie invoked the utopian power of the carnival, but having finally gained power they set about excluding and controlling it, for in realising the radical potential of the carnival they feared it and understood that it had to be repressed. This fear is also a denial of desire because the bourgeois repression of carnival is not only the repression of carnival amongst the common people, it is the repression of carnival in bourgeois culture. The tension between disgust and desire returns in Romanticism as the Romantic grotesque. The grotesque body of Romanticism is the alienated, the living corpse, the bestial, the wanderer, the deformed, it is Frankenstein, the Ancient Mariner, Lautréamont's *Maldoror*; it is Mr Hyde. The celebration of the cyclical abundant collective life of the body in carnival reappears in Romanticism as a delirious

³²⁵ In early 19th century England the revolutionary utopian writings of William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft and Robert Owen had a profound influence on Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Percy Shelley, Blake, Coleridge, Landseer and others.

horror of and desire for degradation and disintegration, to be ravaged by the monster, to be bought low. And this ambivalence is another reason why the shock tactics of the post Dada Anti-Artists can only maintain the autonomy of Art. The use of animal corpses, meat, blood, shit, menstrual fluids, used condoms, self mutilation etc. may disgust the bourgeois public but this disgust is also a fascination with the means of their own superiority: there is pleasure in alienation, and this pleasure is most profound in the distance between having the aesthetic gaze and losing it. To remove this alienation, to experience the loss of the aesthetic gaze in a moment of ungoverned sensual and emotional pleasure, to be unable to differentiate between the sign, the signified and the referent, to lose your subjectivity in the object.....this for the bourgeois is both horrific and seductive. ³²⁶ As Art developed in the early 19th century the Bohemian Artist became the agent licensed to dramatise the repressed desire of the bourgeoisie.

The development of Bohemia can be traced in the culture of the bourgeois revolution. In France between the outbreak of the Revolution of 1789 and the consolidation of the Napoleonic Empire an unprecedented cultural conflict raged concerning the nature of the new Revolutionary society and the identity of the new citizen. The revolutionary bourgeoisie collaborated, celebrated and fought with the common people, together they participated in a revolutionary carnival of riots, marches, executions, the destruction of feudal institutes and monuments, and the euphoria of Revolutionary festivals. In the colony of Saint Domingue white bourgeois revolutionaries fought under the command of black officers. ³²⁷ In Paris the streets became a theatre for the staging of both radical and reactionary spectacle, and this extravagant conflict found expression in the young bourgeoisie with the adoption of symbolic guises and fashions. The three critical modes of these idealised guises were first the everyday clothing of the common people, second the fashions of the English ruling class and third the costumes of the ancient classical cultures of Greece and Rome. In the revolutionary struggle for a transformation of society the young bourgeoisie demonstrated their political

³²⁶ See first Bourdieu, Pierre, *Ibid.* 1986. (P.488) and also P. Stallybrass and A.White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* Methuen, London 1986. (P.5.)

³²⁷ The classic account of the black revolution of Saint Domingue is C.L.R.James, *The Black Jacobins* (1938) Allison and Busby, London. 1994..

allegiance by metaphorically transforming themselves and attempting to realise their metaphors. They made *themselves* political. The radical Sans Culottes adopted the idealised guise of peasants and workers, the reactionary Muscadins and the later Incroyables defied the egalitarian culture of the Revolution by affecting the elegant fashions of the dandies of the English ruling class and a breakaway faction of Art students from Jacques-Louis David's studio known as the Barbus (the Bearded Ones), adopted the cloaks and robes of the classical age and established a utopian vegetarian commune in a suburban district of Paris.³²⁸ However, by the end of the 1790s French society had concluded its experiments with the identity of the citizen, fashion became restrained and standardised, eccentricity condemned. The Revolution was postponed but the bourgeois masque of identity was revived in Bohemia.

The Bohemian cultural tradition developed parallel and engaged with the Utopian Socialism, Republicanism and emergent Anarchism of the years between the fall of Napoleon and the revolutions of 1848. The gypsy realm of Bohemia was founded in the Latin Quarter of Paris, bordered in the East by glamour, fame, heroism, influence, Artistic success and bourgeois respectability and in the West by revolution, poverty, illusion, madness, anonymity, death and oblivion.³²⁹ Though it began in Paris, the culture expanded internationally throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, it shifted and revitalised, from Paris to Barcelona, Vienna, St Petersburg, Berlin, Amsterdam, Greenwich Village, San Francisco, Soho to Brixton. In the aftermath of the fall of Napoleon young artists were torn by stark and conflicting political tensions. The Revolution had been celebrated as the birth of a new society, a new age, a young Republic.³³⁰ The generation of young radical artists born into this zeitgeist anticipated a life of heroic adventure

³²⁸ The Barbus were perhaps the first movement that sought an autonomous Art based on the fetish of a pre-industrial feudalism, they began the tradition that runs through the Nazarenes, the Pre-Raphaelites, the Arts and Crafts Movement, the Symbolists, and into the Hippie communes of the 1960s. In England this tradition can first be identified in the Ancients, the youthful circle that gathered around William Blake in the 1820s. See George Levitine, *The Dawn of Bohemianism, The Barbu Rebellion and Primitivism in Neoclassical France*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London 1978. For the Ancients see Laurence Binyon, *The Followers of Blake*, Benjamin Bloom, London 1968..

³²⁹ See Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris*, Elisabeth Sifton books, Viking Penguin inc. New York and Harmondsworth, Middx. 1986..

³³⁰ See Jerrold Seigel, *Ibid.* 1986.. (P.20)

in which they would dedicate themselves to the Republic, to liberty, fraternity and equality. Instead of which, the new bourgeois State replaced the old feudal patronage of the arts with a capitalist market, forcing the artists into trade. The Bohemians rebelled against their bourgeois parents, refused trade, embraced voluntary poverty and lived for Art.³³¹

The national and international popularity of both the myth and the term *Bohemia* dates from the stories and melodramas of Bohemian life by Henry Murger in the mid 19th century, but the Bohemian realm first coalesced earlier in the century around various groups of radical students and young Artists, notably the *Jeunes-France*, the 'Bousingouts' and the young disciples of Victor Hugo : the poet Gerard de Nerval , the anarchist architect Petrus *the Werewolf* Borel and Theophile Gautier who was also a central figure in the *Art for Art Sake* movement. However, Gautier and his circle were only the stars of a complex subculture which developed an underground network of cafes, cabarets and radical newspapers, a subculture which included both drop-out nobility and beggar prophets selling poems door to door, which at its margins blurred the borders between the Artist, the popular entertainer, the criminal and the insane.

At the core of the Bohemian mythology is a simultaneous rejection of bourgeois society and the desire for transcendental success and acceptance in that society. This ambivalence has a series of interlocking narrative logics; the young genius Artist cannot be constrained by bourgeois normality, normality is rejected because it stifles genius, inevitable success justifies revolt, the suffering of rejection is necessary to produce genius, the tragic death of the genius punishes the Philistines, the genius of the Artist is revealed in death as a tragic victory etc. As the mythology developed and spread in the late 19th century scores of young ambitious but often impoverished students, graduates, Artists and would be Artists trod the martyrs road to the Latin Quarter, the Left Bank and Montmartre, the martyrs mount. In Bohemia these sons of the provinces and the petty bourgeoisie took working class lovers and fraternised with cabaret entertainers,

³³¹ Arnold Hauser, *Ibid.* Vol.3 , 1968. (P.195)

circus performers, labourers, paupers, vagrants, transvestites, prostitutes, pimps, frauds and thieves. The secure and earnest path to a career in the bourgeois professions was despised. In the cafes, garrets and studios of Bohemia they wrote, painted, drank, fought, dreamed, devised and expounded their ideas and their poetry. Above all they dedicated themselves to Art, for Art they rejected their bourgeois destiny and embraced alienation. They Romanticised themselves. As Jerrold Seigel notes, the Bohemians ...

.....discovered that elements of their lives could be employed for a novel purpose: acting out the conflict inherent in the bourgeois character... [...] ...it was the appropriation of marginal life-styles by young and not so young bourgeois, for the dramatisation of ambivalence toward their own social identities and destinies. Many non-bohemians experienced the same ambivalence, but they did not devote their lives to living it out. ³³²

The Bohemians made their lives into Art. Refusing bourgeois identity, the Bohemian adopted a guise from the lower classes or from the nobility: in the first case a long haired gypsy, a dusty peasant, a worker, a street entertainer, a vagabond. In the second case a detached, aristocratic, immaculate and elegant dandy. The gypsy and the dandy stood opposed at the poles of the Artist's longing. The gypsy was alien, irresponsible, mystical, passionate, convivial, carnal and savage, whilst the dandy was the autonomous man, emotionless, elite, fantastic, the arbiter of taste, the *flaneur*, the impassive stroller ; the Bohemian could switch between poles or hybridise the two. The Bohemian life promised all that the Revolution had betrayed: liberty, equality, fraternity. In Bohemia it seemed possible to transcend or evade bourgeois alienation, to become other, to intoxicate themselves, to wander anonymously through the crowd, to sleep in the street, to discover the darkest secrets of the city and the soul, to lose themselves , to howl. The grim paradox was that only the rich could afford to live in Bohemia. For the young petty bourgeois without family wealth or connections the Bohemian life would often end in hack journalism, the lower ranks of the bureaucracy, poverty, debt, illness, madness or death. The history of Bohemia is a slow suicide from Baudelaire to Gerard de Nerval, Verlaine, Alfred Jarry, Jacques Vache, Ivan Chtcheglov, Nina Hamnett, etc. The Artist martyr was born in

³³² Jerrold Seigel, *Ibid.* 1986..(P.11.)

Bohemia, even Murger who celebrated and popularised the Bohemian myth died alone in misery and poverty. Actually, Murger always hated the grinding penury and shabby garrets of Bohemia, he developed his definitive Bohemian myth because after years of scraping a living as a failed Artist and a second rate journalist he finally found something he could sell, something the bourgeois public wanted to buy ; his own misery and alienation Romanticised.

The significance of Bohemia for Underground Cinema lies in gauging both its repressive and subversive historical agency. The critical issue is the relationship between Bohemia and the autonomisation of Art. The formation of Bohemia cannot be simply reduced to the development of a new economic sector for the production of autonomous Art, even if that is how it ultimately functioned within the Art economy. The young bourgeois Bohemians rejected commercial utility and bourgeois domesticity, they rejected a function for Art and so initiated the inertia of the Avant-Garde and the misconception of Anti-Art. But Bohemia is also the initiation of a trajectory which culminated in the radical Counterculture of the 1960s. Core factions of the Bohemians of the mid 19th century were involved in republican, socialist utopian and anarchist revolutionary activity under the influence of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudon ; radical factions of Bohemia fought with the workers on the barricades in the revolution of 1848 and participated in the organisation of the Commune of 1871.³³³ The Bohemian Dadaists and Surrealists were actively engaged with revolutionary Marxist politics and the subversive agitation of the Situationists was a crucial factor in the student revolt of May 1968. Refusing the bourgeois life the radical Bohemians lived in working class districts and socialised with working class men and women, migrant peasants, immigrants from the colonies, social deviants and the criminal underclass. The egalitarian and revolutionary desire of the radical Bohemian Artists led them to construct a utopian culture of masquerade and subversion within the space and logic of capitalism. Whilst inevitably, their resistance was franchised and commodified as Art, within Bohemia it was still possible to lead an experimental life. But, the Bohemian realm was not simply hollowed out in the

³³³ Jerrold Seigel, *Ibid.* 1986..(P.181-215.)

dead space of the city's proletarian districts, it was a colony integrated into the subversive underworld of the popular: it was more a discovery than a creation. Whilst the Avant-Garde dreamt of an autonomous realm of Art, Bohemia was constructed as a complex integrated culture at the intersection of the bourgeois and the popular, the radical Bohemian Artists adopted the guise of the common people and discovered the regions of the popular, this masquerade brought them into contact with popular culture, with common people and with the outsiders and deviants of the city, but it was a strategy which in return gave common people, outsiders and deviants access to the Bohemian realm. Bohemia developed as a convivial zone of relative transgression beneath the rigid stratification of bourgeois society, a carnival zone in which different classes, genders, sexualities and races could socialise. ³³⁴ Whilst Art Theorists have habitually sought the origins of Anti-Art and the key formations of the 20th century Avant-Garde in the realm of Art, the critical inspiration for these projects cannot be found in Art, they must be tracked in the mongrel underground of Bohemia.

In the second half of the 19th century the modernisation and gentrification of Paris led to a shift in the Parisian Bohemia from the interior of the city to the then relatively rustic suburb of Montmartre. ³³⁵ Urban modernisation made Montmartre more accessible but also reconfigured and characterised the district as a Bohemian enclave beyond the margins of bourgeois respectability. This illegitimacy was reinforced by the last stand of the Communards in Montmartre May 1871. ³³⁶ Whilst Paris became increasingly socially stratified and segregated Montmartre developed as a marginal hybrid space where Artists, popular entertainers, workers, vagrants, pimps, prostitutes, revolutionaries, transvestites, charlatans, criminals and junkies could fraternise. Inspired by the rise of urban

³³⁴ As Griselda Pollock has observed, this Bohemian (in her terms Modernist) zone operated within the spatial confines and power relations of patriarchy and so excluded women Artists and feminine Art. See Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity' from *Vision and Difference*, Routledge, London. 1988. (P.69-70) However, Pollock's argument effectively denies creative agency to working class Bohemian women and entertainers since their popular culture is not identified as Art but as merely the expression of a male economy. Moreover, since Art is the 19th century fetish of sacred feudal power, which is to say patriarchal power, it is hardly surprising that few women could participate in its formation.

³³⁵ Jerrold Seigel, *Ibid.* 1986..(P.224-226.)

³³⁶ Philippe Jullian, *Montmartre* (Translated by Anne Carter), Phaidon Press Ltd, Oxford. 1977.(P.44-50)

commercial popular culture and consumer capitalism the Bohemians of Montmartre produced a new hybrid culture which combined elements of the utopian project of the Avant-Garde with popular culture. The dynamic motor of this culture was a fusion of the variety, conviviality and subversion of the popular with the alienation, disillusion and desperation of the Romantic Bohemian and it produced an underground culture of utopian imagination, ironic festivity, nihilistic black humour, extravagant satire, absurd self promotion and sensual abandon. The commercial hub of this mutant sphere was the Bohemian cabaret and its subsidiary magazines. The characteristic praxis of this culture was 'fumisterie', a subversive and often spectacular form of blague, hoax, prank, myth making and parody.

Paris in the late 1870s had a wide range of popular entertainment, there were travelling fairs, the circus, dance halls, café-concerts which were comparable to the English song saloons, and increasingly there were more sophisticated Music Halls which combined the variety of popular forms. Bohemian Artists had for many years frequented popular venues and there were numerous Bohemian cafés which served as centres for Artistic events and groups. However, in the early years of the 1880s there developed in Montmartre a new type of Bohemian cabaret which rather than being a refuge for alienated Artists was designed to compete and engage with popular entertainment. Perhaps the first and certainly the most influential of these cabarets was the Chat Noir founded by the writer Emile Goudeau and the one time painter Rudolphe Salis in 1881.³³⁷ The Chat Noir initially developed as a base for Goudeau's literary group the Hydropathes which operated out of a cafe theatre in the Latin Quarter and published the weekly magazine *L'Hydropathe* (1879-1880). The avowed purpose of this group was to create an arena where young Artists, students, poets and musicians could perform for a popular audience and generate publicity for their work. The work produced by the group was diverse but united by the Bohemian subculture : young, predominately male, anarchic, anti-bourgeois, hedonistic and hard drinking.³³⁸

The magazine featured poetry, articles, illustration and caricatures by the

³³⁷ See Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque, Entertainment and Festivity in Turn of the Century France*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut. 1985.(P.55-73)

³³⁸ Harold B. Segel, *Turn of the Century Cabaret*, Columbia University Press, New York. 1987.(P.7-8).

Hydropathes and provided reciprocal promotion for the activities at the cafe. The group proved a prodigious success, attracting audiences of over six hundred to some events, but by 1881 they had split as a result of fumiste provocation, a faction led by Goudeau had dropped out and the remaining membership reconstituted themselves as the short lived Hirsutes (the Hairy Ones). ³³⁹ Several other related groups developed around the Hydropathes in this period, most notably the Zutistes ('zut ' meaning roughly 'drat') and the Incoherents who organised a series of fumiste events and exhibitions in which Artists entered work under absurd pseudonyms; the entries would include, for instance, a bearded Venus De Milo or sculptures made from bread crumb. ³⁴⁰ Rudolphe Salis was a failed Artist who had renounced painting and opened a small cabaret in Montmartre which he hoped would attract an Artistic Bohemian clientele. To create a Bohemian environment he decorated the interior with rustic and feudal bric a brac, copper pots, tapestries, swords, religious statues, antique furniture, diamantine panels, shields, masks, stuffed animals, stained glass and china cats. Not long after the Hydropathe split, Salis invited Goudeau's faction to establish a base at the Chat Noir. At the new venue the student constituent of the group was superseded by a broader range of amateurs, would be and part-time Artists, musicians and poets, and the Chat Noir effectively became a Bohemian cultural commercial complex of pub, literary cafe, music hall, restaurant, Art gallery, publishing house and book shop. A month after the move the weekly *Le Chat Noir* magazine was established and continued the reciprocal agency of the defunct L'Hydropathe. In atmosphere the cabaret reproduced the conviviality, interaction and spontaneity of the popular music hall, the performers mingled with the audience and the audience would often heckle or comment on the performance. Goudeau and later Salis acted as Music Hall chairmen introducing the acts, which were predominantly poets or chansonniers (poet/singers) who would sing, recite or dramatically declaim. The material and style of work at the early Chat Noir ranged from the absurd and provocative songs of Goudeau and Maurice Mac-Nab to the neurotic and macabre songs of Maurice Rollinat, the radical and scathing social protest of Jean Richepin and Jules Jouy, and the urban street songs of

³³⁹ Harold B. Segel, *Ibid.* 1987.(P.19).

³⁴⁰ Charles Fearick, *Ibid* 1985.(P.61)

Xanrof and Aristide Bruant. Apart from the songs there was also music, storytelling and fumiste comedy. Goudeau was a master of fumiste stunts, most famously he staged the fictitious death and funeral of Salis in 1884 . By 1885 the Chat Noir had outgrown its limited premises and the cabaret moved to an expansive three floor venue further from the lawless main drag. On the day of the move, the cabaret mobilised its performers into a well publicised and outrageous carnival parade which carried all the furniture and fixtures through the streets of Montmartre from the old to the new venue. This form of Bohemian carnival procession later became a cabaret tradition known as the *Vachalcade* which was still popular in the 1920s. ³⁴¹ The new Chat Noir extended the fumiste strategy into the very fabric and life of the cabaret, the decor became an absurd montage which combined the proto-Modernist paintings murals and drawings of the Bohemians with Salis' feudal bric a brac . ³⁴² The many rooms of the building were given multiple official names such as the *Secret Library* or the *Office of the Archives and Disputed Claims Dept.* The waiters were dressed as members of the prestigious Académie Française and the audience was treated with exaggerated and ironic deference. The crucial expansion in the cabaret's entertainment was the construction of a shadow theatre which presented spectacular multi-coloured shadow plays accompanied by spoken narrative, dialogue and improvised or specially composed music . ³⁴³ The key figure in the cabaret revival of the shadow play was Henri Rivière who developed an astonishing repertoire of techniques using magic lanterns, coloured transparencies, perforations, complex multiple puppets, perspective and smoke. The shadow play rapidly became an essential element of the Bohemian cabaret programme, at the Chat Noir they were presented nightly from around 1886, and as other cabarets proliferated so they also reproduced and developed the form. ³⁴⁴ The phenomenal success of the Chat Noir generated a wave of imitators and breakaway cabarets most notably Aristide Bruant's *Le Mirliton*, the *Auberge du Clou*, the *Ane Rouge*, *Les Quat'z' Arts*, the *Cabaret des Assassins* and the *Abbaye de Thélème*, named after Rabelais

³⁴¹ Nancy Perloff, *Art and the Everyday, Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie*, Clarendon press, Oxford.1991.(P.12.).

³⁴² Charles Rearick, *Ibid* 1985.(P.58-59)

³⁴³ Harold B. Segel, *Ibid*.1987.(P.1).

³⁴⁴ Nancy Perloff, *Ibid*.1991.(P.23.).

utopian monastery. These rivals copied and developed the Chat Noir cabaret/magazine formula and gradually the culture expanded nationally and internationally ; the Chat Noir and the Mirliton mounted touring shows and derivative cabarets opened in the enclaves of Europe's other Bohemian districts. Whilst the Artists of the cabarets and magazines held a range of political positions and the most prestigious venues were increasingly invaded by bourgeois interlopers there was a radical Socialist/ Anarchist allegiance at the core of the culture and many of the founding Artists and activists were committed radicals, critically Théodore Steinlen and Adolphe Willette. Perhaps the most integrated expression of cabaret radicalism was the work of the popular actor, writer, music hall performer, cabaret manager and fumiste Maxime Lisbonne who had served as a colonel in the Commune and was transported to New Caledonia as a convict.³⁴⁵ In 1881 Lisbonne returned to Paris where he worked as an actor in melodrama and walked the streets in a flamboyant revolutionary uniform. In 1885 he set up the first in a series of cafes and taverns in Montmartre based on his experiences as a revolutionary and a convict, the Taverne du Bagne (Tavern of Convicts), where the walls were adorned with the heroes of the Commune, the waiters were dressed as life prisoners and twice a week Lisbonne would lecture on the Commune and preside over a dramatic shackling of the convicts (waiters) . In 1886 Lisbonne followed the success of the Taverne du Bagne with the Taverne de la Révolution Française, and in 1888 he opened the Brasserie de Frites Révolutionnaires.

The Chat Noir closed in 1887 and by the turn of the century the spectacular creativity of the Montmartre cabarets had been dissipated by ruthless commercialisation, changes in popular fashion and the advent of new forms of popular entertainment, most significantly music hall, revue, cinema and jazz. Moreover, the commercial success of the Bohemian cabaret had encountered a paradox that would later perplex and impede the Counterculture. The commercial success of the Chat Noir and its most celebrated competitors depended upon creating for their audience a temporary and clandestine zone of Bohemian

³⁴⁵ Daniel Gerould, 'Melodrama and Revolution' in J. Bratton et al (eds) *Melodrama, Stage, Picture , Screen*. B.F.I. London.1994.(P.190-191)

freedom, transgression and conviviality, but paradoxically commercial success tended to undermine these very qualities: the intimate Bohemian diversity and spontaneous interaction of the cabaret became increasingly compromised by a socially conventional and affluent bourgeois audience. This enervation was reinforced by the feuds and schisms within the subculture which were frequently caused by the informal, amateur and collective financial and contractual relations between the venues, managers, writers and performers. ³⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the dynamic fusion of popular culture and Bohemian utopianism which coalesced around the Chat Noir continued to expand and mutate.

The development of Anti-Art and the related Avant-Garde projects of Futurism and Cubism were driven by a popular renovation of Art led by the Bohemian cabarets of the late 19th century. Key clusters of Artists and Anti-Artists emerged from the cabaret culture, crucially the arch fumiste Alfred Jarry, a seminal influence on Dada and Surrealism, Marcel Duchamp who abandoned painting for fumism and the composer Erik Satie who crossed the intersection of the Avant-Garde and the popular and influenced a generation of young disciples, including Darius Milhaud and Jean Cocteau. ³⁴⁷ Cabaret and popular culture was a formative influence on the work of Picasso and the development of Cubism : montage, music hall revue, graffiti, fumiste comedy, advertising, circus etc. ³⁴⁸ Both the Italian and the Russian Futurists were critically influenced by popular forms ; in 1913 Marinetti hailed the Variety theatre as the realm of the *Futurist marvellous*. ³⁴⁹

³⁴⁶ Charles Rearick, *Ibid* 1985.(P.71-79)

³⁴⁷ For Duchamp's deployment of fumism see Jeffrey Weiss, *The Popular Culture of Modern Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut. 1994. (P.109-145)

³⁴⁸ See Jeffrey S.Weiss, 'Picasso, Collage and the Music Hall' in Adam Gopnick and Kirk Varnedoe eds.) *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High and Low*, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1990.(P.82-115) and also the excellent survey Adam Gopnick and Kirk Varnedoe, *High and Low, Modern Art and Pop Culture*, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1990.

³⁴⁹ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'The Variety Theatre' (1913) reprinted in *Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Selected Writings* (ed. R.W.Flint) Secker and Warburg, London (1971).(P.117)

In 1922 the Soviet Eccentric group (F.E.K.S.) declared that their parents were :

In song - The Torch singer, Pinkerton, the cry of the auctioneer, slang.
In painting - The circus poster, the jacket of a cheap pulp thriller.
In music - The jazz band, (black street orchestra), circus marches.
In ballet - American song and dance routines.
In theatre - Music Hall, cinema, circus, cabaret, boxing. ³⁵⁰

But the critical and exemplary link between cabaret and the Avant-Garde is the direct agency of cabaret on the formation of Dada and Anti-Art. The company, constitution and purpose of Dada was formed at the Cabaret Voltaire founded by the poet Hugo Ball and the cabaret singer Emmy Hennings in the red light district of Zurich 1916. The initial discovery made by Ball, Hennings, Richard Huelsenbeck, Tristan Tzara and the Dada gang was not a new Art or an Anti-Art, it was the intoxicating liberation of Non Art : the popular, the convivial, montage and the fumiste strategy of Bohemia. ³⁵¹ Although the fumiste / cabaret culture of Montmartre was substantially created by Bohemian Artists they nonetheless respected and maintained a border between their Bohemian lives and the official and autonomous realm of Art. The critical transformation of the Dadaists was that they attempted to make Bohemia their Art. The subsequent development of Paris Dada and Surrealism in the 1920s is not the emergence of a new culture but the return of a culture translated in the East.

³⁵⁰ Yutkevich, Trauberg, Kryzhitskii and Kozintsev , *The Eccentric Manifesto* (1922) Eccentric Press, London. 1992.(P.14).

³⁵¹ The context of Dada, Anti-Art and the popular is documented in the captivating study by Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces : A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* , Secker and Warburg, London.1990.

Chapter Nine

The Origins of the U.S. Underground in the Cultural Hybrid of Popular Culture, Anti-Art and the Counterculture.

Parallel to the development of the European Avant-Garde of the 1920s and the British Independent film movement of the 1930s the U.S. developed an experimental film culture as an integrated component of a national network of Amateur cine clubs, film societies and specialist Little Cinemas.³⁵² This chapter will first chart the continuities and contrasts between the development of post-war American and European experimental film culture, and second contextualise the distinctive development of the American Underground Cinema.

The dynamic hybridisation of Dada was inevitably appropriated by Art, nevertheless, the Anti-Art fusion of pop and utopian experiment entered cinema as the initiation of a new cinematic mode. Dada/Surrealist film is frequently considered an element of the broader Avant-Garde film movement of the 1920s, however, it must also be understood that Dada/Surrealist film was not conceived as *Avant-Garde* by its makers and that the key Dada/Surrealist films mobilise the radical fusion of popular and experimental forms that culminated in Underground Cinema thirty years later.³⁵³ The Surrealist 'classic' *Un Chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali 1929) has long been subjected to intensive Theoretical investigation as a psycho-sexual dream text or a poetic meta-text, but the popular core of the film is routinely neglected ; *Un Chien andalou* is a sophisticated experiment in popular narrative montage, its subversive power is entirely derived from a complex understanding, pastiche and subversion of continuity editing, melodramatic acting, narrative intertitles etc.³⁵⁴ If the Avant-Garde project in

³⁵² Jan-Christopher Horak, 'The First American Film Avant-garde, 1919-1945' from Jan-Christopher Horak (ed.) ,*Lovers of the Cinema*, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin 1995. (P.14-66).

³⁵³ For the Surrealist rejection of Avant-Garde cinema see Robert Desnos, 'Avant-garde Cinema' originally published in Documents No.7 1929 reprinted in Hammond, Paul (E d.), *The Shadow and its Shadow*, BFI , London. 1978. (P.36)

³⁵⁴ For a characteristic psychoanalytic reading of 'Un Chien andalou' see Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire : A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992. (P.56-79).

cinema was ultimately to free film from the popular then *Un Chien andalou*, *Entr'acte* (René Clair 1920), *L'Age d'or* (Buñuel 1930), *Le Sang d'un poète* (Jean Cocteau 1930) and a cluster of other Dada/Surrealist films must be understood as the initiation of an experimental cinema project that is not (Avant-Garde) Art but a radical fusion of elements of Anti-Art and popular cinema. This is the project that was resumed in the work of the most radical post-war experimental European filmmakers, most significantly the experimental narrative work of Jean Luc Godard and the subversive montage of the Lettrist/Situationist movement. This pop Anti-Art hybrid is a core element of Underground Cinema, however, the development of British Underground Cinema in the late 1950s had few direct links with continental Europe, the dominant influence on Britain was American Underground cinema, both by example and direct intervention.

In the early 1940s, whilst European experimental cinema was effectively suspended for the duration of the war, America began to supersede Europe as the international centre of experimental film production. However although the ascension of American experimental film was an element of a broader relocation of Avant-Garde Modernist ideology, Artists, Anti-Artists and institutional aesthetic authority from Europe to the new economic and cultural dominance of the U.S. it would be wrong to suppose that the ascension of U.S. experimental cinema was the seamless transference of European Avant-Garde film culture to the fertile new colony of America.³⁵⁵ The cultural context and ultimate trajectory of post-war U.S. experimental film was critically different to European Avant-Garde film culture. First, the role of Art as the official, sacred, elite and autonomous culture of the ruling class was contested in 19th century America and was not secured in the first half of the 20th century. Consequently, there was no catalyst for a native Anti-Art movement until after the institutionalisation of American Modernist

³⁵⁵ Exemplary agents in this migration were Iris Barry the original secretary of the London Film Society and an editor of *Close Up* magazine who became the curator of film at the New York Museum of Modern Art, the German abstract animator Oskar Fischinger who was a key influence in the development of the West Coast experimental scene, the German Dadaist Hans Richter who taught film making at City College in New York (1942-1956), the Czech film maker Alexander Hammid who co-directed *Meshes of the Afternoon* with Maya Deren, and the Lithuanian film maker, critic, poet and dramatist Jonas Mekas who became the pivotal advocate and organiser of post war American experimental film. See also Lauren Rabinovitz, 'Wearing the Critic's Hat: History, Critical Discourses, and the 'American Avant-Garde Cinema' in David E. James, *Ibid.* 1992.(P.271-274)

Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s.³⁵⁶ Secondly, American popular culture was far more commercially dynamic and socially pervasive than in Europe, and the border between the popular and American art was more interactive. Crucially however, this interaction was tempered by a complex and repressive spectrum of polarity between legitimate and illegitimate culture structured by the colonial hierarchy of race and the radical agency of African-Americans in the popular realm.

The revitalised experimental film culture that developed in the first decades of post-war America was relatively disengaged from the tension of the European Avant-Garde project, it was loose and dispersed, there was no centralised programme, movement or manifesto. The work produced was diverse ranging from Modernist mystical synaesthetic abstraction to poetic narrative, but a defining feature was an intense and personal exploration of myth, ritual, dream and the psyche. Although an informal framework of public and private sponsorship gradually developed there was no central and systematic institutional State intervention equivalent to Grierson's model or the later B.F.I. sponsorship of the Free Cinema movement. This institutional autonomy was reinforced by an accelerating shift to amateur cine technology which imposed on American experimental film both the liberation and the constraint of amateur cine culture. For the pre-war European Avant-Garde it had been necessary and desirable to work in the margins of the commercial film industry with access to commercial technology and at least limited access to commercial distribution and exhibition. In post-war America increasing access to cheap and versatile amateur cine technology made it possible for isolated lone makers and small affinity groups to produce experimental films totally independent from the commercial industry, but this amateurism also exiled their work from the commercial realm.³⁵⁷ In the absence of an effective Avant-Garde film movement and increasingly excluded

³⁵⁶ Andreas Huyssen 'The Search for Tradition' (1981) reprinted in Andreas Huyssen *Ibid.* 1988. (See P. 168)

³⁵⁷ This is a point partially suggested by Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens and Superstars : Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*, Indiana University Press. 1996. (P.59-60). The potential of amateur cine as a radical experimental sector was actually recognised by the American amateur cine movement before the war. See Patricia R. Zimmermann, 'Startling Angles, Amateur Film and the Early Avant-Garde' in Jan-Christopher Horak (ed.) , *Ibid.* 1995. (P.137-155).

from the commercial industry, American experimental film developed as an amateur, illegitimate, diverse, fragmented and hybrid culture. An essential component of this culture was the intimate and complex relationship between experiment and the popular in the work of many of the key makers ³⁵⁸.

The emergence of Underground Cinema in the late 1950s was the culmination of the specifically American tendencies in the post-war experimental scene which were condensed and augmented by the Beat movement. The Beats were a cluster of Bohemian poets, novelists and film makers who extravagantly fostered and sometimes denied their own mythology, but Beat culture must also be understood as a broader youth pop subculture centred on New York and the West Coast from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. Beat was nurtured by economic prosperity and ideological, sexual and racial repression. In the decade following the end of the war American corporate capitalism consolidated its triumph and the Cold War anti-Communist witch hunts effectively purged the organisations of the Left from industry, politics, education and the public sphere. The unprecedented post-war expansion of the American mass media was exploited by the bourgeoisie in a renewed attempt to enforce the legitimate culture of white bourgeois Anglo-Saxon Protestant heterosexual patriarchy: the square world. The young Bohemians who rejected the square dream of normal America increasingly recognised that not only were a diversity of popular cultures excluded from the legitimate realm but that these excluded cultures had developed fascinating, vital and effective strategies to resist and subvert bourgeois culture. The exemplary and essential paradigm of this oppositional pop culture was jazz. Black popular culture was the creative triumph of African-American people over systematic racist oppression and yet it was also a culture formed in that oppression. It was a culture which preserved and developed the suppressed ethnicity of the African-American people and yet it incorporated and hybridised the white European popular tradition and it was appropriated and adopted by white participants. As a component in the development of legitimate white culture, black pop articulated

³⁵⁸ Maya Deren was fascinated by voodoo, Kenneth Anger was fascinated by Hollywood and popular culture and the abstract animator Harry Smith was a prodigious expert on American popular music and the compiler of the 'Anthology of American Folk Music', a series of recordings which had a seminal influence on the Folk music 'revival' of the 1960s.

the polarity of the popular vs. legitimate culture binary. Square America projected the carnival onto African-American culture ; black pop culture was designated a realm of masquerade, grotesque humour, parody, excess and carnal pleasure. Blackness was conceived as the carnival inversion of official bourgeois culture: irrational, promiscuous, infantile, flamboyant, uninhibited, spontaneous, lazy, brazen, passionate, natural and sensual. ³⁵⁹ This Carnivalisation created an ambivalent realm of carnival blackness which although it was racist and restrictive could also be deployed by African-Americans to resist and subvert white bourgeois culture. The most influential form of this radical black pop culture in the first half of the 20th century was the outlaw jazz music which developed in the dance halls, carnivals, clubs and brothels of late 19th century New Orleans. Jazz was spontaneous, improvised, illiterate, ambivalent, polyrhythmic, complex, collective and convivial. It was ironic and parodic, it took white music and played with it, broke the musical frame, restructured it, repeated it, scattered its components and miraculously montaged it back together. ³⁶⁰ The double bluff of jazz deflected the racist parody of blackness by parodying its own composition whilst still invoking the freedom of the people. Jazz condensed the radical popular into a means and an end, a method that could be applied not only to music but to poetry, painting and film making ; culture could be jazzed up. Moreover, jazz invoked the underground black pop subculture, the cool hipster world which refused and mocked the oppression of the squares. This jazz identity, the masque of blackness, was appropriated by white Beats to masquerade their ambivalence, alienation and resistance to the square world. Beat culture fused European Bohemianism and black popular culture and relocated the utopian realm to a mythic liberated America. Whilst the European Bohemians dreamt of gypsy travels to ancient exotic lands the Beats sought a contemporary redemption on the endless road from the forests to the bars, pool rooms, deserts, lofts, oceans, cities and canyons of America. Like European Bohemianism, Beat developed as a zone of relative transgression in square society. They shunned the nine to five

³⁵⁹ The carnivalisation of blackness can be clearly illustrated by the history of the development of black face minstrelsy both in the U.S. and Europe. See for instance Michael Pickering, 'White Skin, Black Masks : 'Nigger' Minstrelsy in Victorian England' in J.S.Brattton (ed.), *Music Hall Performance and Style* , Open University Press, Milton Keynes 1986.

³⁶⁰ See Roger Taylor, *Ibid.* 1978. (P.89-155).

corporate existence and lived desperate lives of voluntary poverty. They experimented with drugs, magic, Zen, popular montage, sex and psychoanalysis. Instead of cabaret they had the jazz club, Bebop and poetry readings at the coffee shop. Mostly they were middle class, male and white but there were working class Beats, female Beats, black Beats, and the saints of the movement were queer or bisexual : Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady. Bohemianism had always been a culture of sexual freedom, of promiscuity, miscegenation, misalliance, polygamy, of queers, lesbians, bisexuals and transvestites. And the Bohemian sensibility had always had an intrinsic Camp component which was a definitive element of cabaret culture, fumism and Anti-Art. What differentiated the sexual character of the Beats from previous Bohemian movements was first the degree to which they integrated their deviant sexuality into their work and second their reconception of Camp as a subversive and utopian strategy. This radicalised camp had its most articulate expression in Underground cinema in the work of makers like Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, the Kuchar Brothers, John Waters, Jim Bidgood etc.

The essential shift from European Bohemia to American Beat culture was that whilst the Avant-Garde had sought to realise Art, and the Anti-Artists had attempted to make Bohemia into Art, the writers and film makers of the Beat movement formed a hybrid subculture of pop and Anti-Art which had its most radical agency as a popular form ; Beat was not Art. Beat culture was the initiation of a 20th century utopian pop subculture which culminated in the Counterculture of the 1960s.

The two key factors in the development of the Counterculture, were the rise of the Anglo-American New Left and the generation of Rock music , the axis of both these developments was a complex cultural interaction between America and Britain. The germinal year for the Underground was 1956, an historic convocation of revolutionary events and radical currents.

By the early 1950s the American Left was demoralised by political defeat and suppressed by Cold War witch hunts and anti-union legislation whilst the British Left had stagnated between the dogmatic poles of Stalinism and the reformist Labour Party.³⁶¹ However, in 1956 the inertia of the Left was challenged by a series of events which both exposed the tyranny of Stalinist/Soviet rule and the ruthless imperialism of the West: Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, riots and strikes in Poland, the Suez crisis and anti-colonial struggle in the Middle East and Cuba. In Britain a radical New Left movement emerged that rejected both the legacy of Stalin and the reformism of the established Labour movement. The New Left gathered around the development of the journal *New Left Review* (1959), the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the London New Left Club in Soho. An essential component of the movement was the reciprocal allegiance and involvement of cultural activists from the contiguous Angry Young Man drama/literary movement and the Free Cinema group. The central thematic of the New Left was that Socialism had to be radically reconceived if it was to challenge the new forms of post-war corporate and consumer capitalism and that this reconception had to be based on the development of a rigorous intellectual investigation into contemporary society.³⁶² Structurally the movement reacted against the hierarchical party discipline, dogmatism and anti-intellectualism of the established Left by attempting to develop projects which were popular, non-hierarchical, heterogeneous in membership and perspective, and integrated in theory and practice. Crucially, the analysis of popular culture was seen as an integrated component of the New Left revision and a cluster of key New Left theorists subsequently became the founders of British Cultural Studies: E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. In the context of the development of the 1960s Underground /Counterculture a crucial factor was that the rapid and phenomenal growth of C.N.D. was vitalised by the participation of a Bohemian Trad jazz youth/student subculture who transformed protest marches and mass sit-down occupations into

³⁶¹ The most audacious account of the birth of the New Left in America is by David Zane Mairowitz, *The Radical Soap Opera*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.1976.. For the British New Left see Robin Archer (et al) (eds.), *Out of Apathy*, Verso, London. 1989.

³⁶² See Stuart Hall, 'The 'First' New Left: Life and Times' in Archer (et al) (eds.) *Ibid.*1989.(P.11-39).

carnival Vachalcades of improvised jazz and laughter. ³⁶³ It was from this Trad jazz Bohemia that the London Rhythm and Blues scene and the Rolling Stones group developed in the early 1960s.³⁶⁴

In America the New Left developed from the influence of the British New Left, the rise of the Black Civil Rights movement and support for the Cuban revolution of 1959. Whereas in Britain the New Left developed as a generation disenchanted with the established Left, in America the young activists of the New Left emerged from the Cold War suppression of the Left and they rediscovered Socialism/ Anarchism as the resurrection of a lost creed. ³⁶⁵

The development of the revolutionary culture of Rock music paralleled the emergence of the New Left. By the late 1950s the beloved Bebop jazz of the Beat scene was being superseded in Underground culture by hybrid currents of Rhythm and Blues and reinvented Folk music. The popular form that was to eclipse jazz as the essential music of the Underground began as a hybrid of black Rhythm and Blues and elements of white Hillbilly Country and Western Swing : Rock and Roll. White teenage Cold War America encountered Rock and Roll as the return of the repressed. Rock broke out of the black radio stations and the backwoods white hillbilly circuit into the teenage bedrooms of middle class America and turned them on. The Rockers invoked the carnival blackness of wild subversive and sensual liberation. And the appropriation of this black wildness by white Rockers transgressed the legitimate borders of American popular culture and the legitimacy of the white identity. Rock and Roll challenged the sedation of bourgeois culture ; throughout 1956 America was riven by a wave of teenage Rock and Roll riots, moral panic and prohibition against the primitive voodoo jungle music. In Britain the first incendiary public appearances were not live but cinematic. *When Rock Around the Clock* (Dir. Fred F. Sears 1956) starring Bill Haley and the Comets was released into British cinemas thousands of teenagers refused

³⁶³ Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, Paladin, London. 1970.(P.42-52).

³⁶⁴ Jeff Nuttall, *Ibid.*1970.(P.34 -39).

³⁶⁵ See Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau, *The New Radicals*, Penguin Books Ltd. , Harmondsworth. 1967. (P.20-21) also Roger Lewis, *Outlaws of America* , Penguin Books Ltd. , Harmondsworth. 1972. (P.154-159)

the sedation of their cinema seats and danced and sang in the aisles.³⁶⁶ After 1956, Rock and Roll developed as a complex of rival subcultures and cultural currents: Rockabilly, Rhythm and Blues, surfing and hot rod pop, the British Rockers, the Mods, Folk rock, the Mersey beat, psychedelic rock etc.

The Counterculture of the 1960s, although limited and unstable, marked a revolutionary historical nexus, a fusion of pop culture and radical utopian politics convened by a provisional mass confederation of the diversity of Western oppositional subcultures against the square world: radical student activists, working class youth, feminists, black and Latin American radicals, peace protesters, anarchists, commune-ists, Anti-Artists, Gay Liberationists, ecologists, hippies, heads, freaks, motorcycle gangs etc. The status of the Counterculture as a radical and lasting *political* agent is open to dispute but what is certain is the revolutionary effect of the Counterculture upon popular culture. In the Counterculture the arcane and elite subculture of Bohemia was transformed into a radical pop culture which invoked the revolutionary desires of a generation of young people. Whilst it was clearly recognised by contemporary participants and later cultural theorists that the Counterculture was almost immediately appropriated and commodified by the consumer industries and commercial popular media what is seldom acknowledged is that popular culture was an elementary catalyst of the Counterculture and that the commodification of the Counterculture distributed its radical agency into the domestic heart of the square world. In the Counterculture the Bohemian masquerade developed into the hybrid hippie style which combined elements of both the gypsy and dandy with other elements of iconic outsiderdom: the cowboy, the comic book hero, the Latin American revolutionary, the native American, the African, the magician, the eastern mystic etc. This masquerade of dissent was popularised by the mass media and spontaneously understood by a generation of teenagers; all across the West, square parents woke up with Bohemian children. Moreover, the popularisation of Bohemia by the Counterculture was crucially a reclamation of the utopian potential of popular culture and a central element of this was the appropriation

³⁶⁶ John Swenson, *Bill Haley*, W.H.Allen, London 1982.(P.86-87).

and transformation of Folklore from repressive bourgeois myth to the subversive and liberating counter-myth of neo paganism, eco-activism and free festival traveller culture. Another essential element was drug (ab)use which functioned as a radical catalyst at many social, industrial and *aesthetic* levels, not least of which was the interaction between drug altered consciousness and the reception and production of culture.

The term *Underground* was first deployed by Beat and early Countercultural agents to designate their subculture of resistance beneath the square world : it was a metaphoric invocation of the resistance groups of the Second World War who secretly sabotaged the Fascist occupation of Europe. Crucially the Underground understood itself to be a culture; to be not only a community and a way of life but a sensibility that could realise the secret sub-text of utopian liberation in popular culture.³⁶⁷ A preeminent exponent and instigator of this subversion was William Burroughs who popularised the experimental, random and ludic montage techniques developed by the Dadaists. Burroughs novels are cinematic ; a montage of hard boiled crime fiction, pulp science fiction, hard core porn and utopian satire composed in cut-up method and jazz technique, and spoken in the junkie Beat drawl. Burroughs influence on both the Underground and popular culture is inestimable, his prose style became a characteristic voice of the Underground press, he influenced a new generation of science fiction writers, he inspired countless rock lyrics and band names and his work inspired and consolidated the development of the Underground Cinema movement.

The Underground press developed around the early 1960s as a diverse culture of magazines, fanzines and newspapers produced by and for local or affinity communities within the Counterculture. By the late 1960s there was a national and international Underground press network covering the diversity of the Counterculture : radical politics, feminism, black power, gay liberation, drug

³⁶⁷ The subversive underground of Hollywood pulp action movies was first explored by the critic Manny Farber in 1957 in the article *Underground Films* later compiled in Manny Farber, *Negative Space*, De Capo Press, New York 1998.(P.12-24).

culture, ecology, alternative religion, poetry, comic books, rock journalism and Underground news and events. 368

Underground Cinema first developed around the late 1950s as a component of the emergent Counterculture; a heretical and mercurial combination of experimental film, amateur cine culture, pop, Beat, Camp, radical Agit-Prop and Anti-Art. The shift from experimental film to Underground was a gradual and disparate process ; it was the surfacing of a subculture. Nevertheless, the key formative and federate events happened in New York towards the end of 1958 and into 1959. 369 The formation of an Underground coalition began with a phase of activity around the concept of a New American Cinema. In 1949 Jonas Mekas, the pivotal activist in the development of the infrastructure of the New York Underground, left a refugee camp in Germany and arrived in New York. After attending a few of Hans Richter's classes at City College he became increasingly involved in film criticism, independent film making and experimental cinema. In 1955 he founded the highly influential Film Culture magazine which initially specialised in European and Avant Garde cinema but which also featured the pioneer auteur criticism of Hollywood cinema by Andrew Sarris. 370 In November 1958 Mekas began a long running polemical cinema column in the prototype New York Underground newspaper the Village Voice. That same year the experimental maker Shirley Clarke teamed up with the radical Verité documentary makers Don Pennebaker, Richard Leacock and the Mayles brothers to form a film maker's co-operative : Filmmakers Inc. Meanwhile, a number of key low budget independent films were in production which anticipated the advent of the Underground. The two crucial films were John Cassavetes' Verité style narrative feature *Shadows* (1959) and Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's partially improvised short *Pull My*

368 Amongst the most successful and influential imprints were the *East Village Other* (New York), the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the *San Francisco Oracle*, *Rolling Stone Magazine* and the *International Times* (London). See Roger Lewis, *Ibid.* 1972..

369 The dating of the first wave of the American Underground is difficult since the movement must be understood as a complex combination of production, distribution and exhibition factors. Various historians have made inclusive and exclusive periodisations. Whilst many have blurred the distinction between the Avant-Garde and the Underground recently Juan A. Suárez has localised the Underground to five years: 1961-1966. See Juan A. Suárez, *Ibid.* 1996.(P.55).

370 See P.Adams Sitney, *Film Culture, An Anthology*, Secker and Warburg, London.1971.(P.13)

Daisy (1959) which featured Kerouac, Ginsberg and Gregory Corso.³⁷¹ Both films were premiered at the end of 1959 at Amos Vogel's Cinema 16. Mekas came to believe that these films, his own work and the work of the new Verité documentary makers were the vanguard of a new wave of commercial independent cinema comparable to the European New Wave and the British Free Cinema group, and increasingly he directed *Film Culture*, his criticism and activism towards the development of this New American Cinema. However, it rapidly and brutally became obvious to the makers and advocates of this new wave that low budget independent film could not break into the American commercial distribution/exhibition industry. In response to this exclusion Mekas, Shirley Clarke, Emile de Antonio and other leading activists organised the New American Cinema Group (N.A.C.G.), a coalition of low budget feature directors, Verité documentarists and experimental makers formed to promote an alternative/oppositional film production, exhibition and distribution sector. In the summer of 1961 the group published a manifesto in *Film Culture* which declared their ethical and aesthetic opposition to the commercial film industry, censorship and trade union restrictions, and their commitment to personal film making, freedom of expression, low budget production and co-operative organisation. Critically the manifesto rejected the classicism and purity of the Avant-Garde and advocated opposition and engagement :

.....we are for art, but not at the expense of life. We don't want false, polished, slick films - we prefer them rough, unpolished, but alive; we don't want rosy films - we want them the colour of blood. ³⁷²

From the founding of the N.A.C.G. Mekas became the central co-ordinator, propagandist, publicist and impresario of American experimental cinema ; the ringleader of a complex interlinked web of activists, organisations and initiatives. Parallel to the founding of the N.A.C.G. he set up the first of a series of highly influential and popular late night screenings of experimental film at various New York theatres and cinemas which culminated in a screening programme active

³⁷¹ The contemporary film maker and writer Steve Dwoskin cites *Pull My Daisy* as the first Underground film. See Steve Dwoskin, *Film Is*, (1975) the Overlook Press, New York. 1985.(P.50.)

³⁷² Jonas Mekas et al , 'The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group' compiled in P. Adams Sitney (ed.) *Film Culture, An Anthology*, Secker and Warburg, London.1971. (P.79-84).

throughout the 1960s : the Film-Makers Cinematheque. He organised international touring programmes, he worked with Shirley Clarke to commercially distribute independent feature films and he was a key agent in the founding of the radical Agit-Prop film collective Newsreel. However, the most influential and effective of the initiatives led by Mekas was the Film-Makers Co-Op (1962) a collective, democratic, non-profit, open access and non-selective distribution group which became the hub of New York Underground activity, the base for international Underground propaganda and the model for Co-Op organisations in Britain, Australia and across continental Europe.

The New American Cinema as a concept and a movement was always frustrated by exclusion from the commercial industry and politically compromised by the limited inclusion it did achieve ; the hope and desire to compete with the established feature film industry was increasingly abandoned. Instead, Mekas and other experimental activists began to adopt the more radical project of a Countercultural experimental amateur cinema, an Underground Cinema.

The shift from the competitive commercialism of the New American Cinema to the amateur autarky of the Underground should be understood as both the critical and industrial formation of the movement, and as the co-option of an already emergent Underground tendency. Contiguous to the earlier experimental film movement and the Beat subculture, the Underground movement developed around and between the two key Bohemian zones of New York and the West Coast. In New York the activity centred around the Co-Op, the Film-Makers Cinematheque and later around the Millennium Film Workshop, an open access production/exhibition centre set up by film maker Ken Jacobs. In the West the centre was the San Francisco Canyon Cinema Cooperative (1963) founded by film maker Bruce Baillie and based on the New York Co-Op model. Whereas the New American Cinema campaign had to compete in an industrial context controlled by the commercial industry, Underground Cinema operated as an integrated component of the emerging Counterculture. Whilst European Avant-Garde film had been secluded in the institution of Art, the Underground functioned as a new

convivial, contingent and radical popular cinema in which audio/visual experiment was an integrated element of a broader subversion of bourgeois authority, a subversion which also celebrated psychedelic drug use, utopian radicalism, ecstatic mysticism and other forms of altered perception. Underground Cinema developed from the Beat Bohemia into a Countercultural cinema of attractions comparable to the Bohemian cabaret, the early music hall and fairground booth cinema and the Penny Gaffs. The venues for the Underground were illegitimate ; late night screenings in rundown movie houses, lofts shows, psychedelic clubs, porn cinemas, bookshops, warehouse parties and rock gigs. The Underground projector would stand amongst the intoxicated audience casting its ray through a fug of smoke. The attractions of the Underground Cinema corresponded to the utopian desire of the Countercultural audience. Against the industrial anonymity of commercial cinema Underground film celebrated the subjective vision of the lone maker. Films marked with amateurism, incompetence and poverty were enjoyed as spontaneous, honest and democratic subversions of the sedated commercial cinema and the repression of legitimate culture. Surreal and fantastic distortions of narrative space and time were perceived as glimpses of alternate, occult and liberated realities. Abstract and experimental cinematic techniques were enjoyed not as Art but as psychedelic visual stimulation which promoted or enhanced hallucinogenic intoxication and cosmic fantasy. Taboo images of sex, violence and death were relished for the transgressive thrill of evading the square inertia. The attraction of the Underground was subversion. A defining feature of the movement was the heterogeneity of its production ; Underground film included work by lone makers, collective productions, experimental shorts, home movies, low budget features, Agit-Prop documentary, psychedelic visuals, the Anti-Art of the Fluxus group and Avant-Garde Art. The Underground included makers from the earlier post-war experimental scene such as Kenneth Anger and Harry Smith. Makers who had provisional allegiances with the Underground such as Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol. And makers who defined the Underground film culture such as Jack Smith, the Kuchar Brothers, Bruce Conner, Ron Rice, Naomi Levine, Barbara Rubin, Bruce Baillie and the Newsreel Collective. This inclusivity was a key

strategy of the Underground opposition to the exclusivity of the commercial industry, and to State censorship and control. Against industrial and institutional hierarchical order the Underground deployed chaotic and personal self selecting participation, bounded and convened by the Counterculture, and the radical politic of Underground amateur distribution and exhibition. As the Counterculture blossomed from Bohemian enclave to pop culture so amateur experimental film became for a brief and glorious time a popular culture ; at the height of its notoriety Underground screenings attracted capacity audiences, national newspapers and magazines ran features on the Underground culture, a series of books were published, film festivals were established all over America, infamous Underground films scandalised the nation and provoked student riots.

Mekas' critical position throughout the 1960s was, like the Underground itself, equivocal. He denounced competitive commercialism and yet he conceived the Underground as an integrated alternative film industry. Moreover, his attitude was at once populist and Avant-Garde ; he simultaneously believed both in the sacred redemptive aura of Art and in the potential of cinema to become a truly democratic and convivial popular culture. The reconciliation of this ambivalence was the hope that if only Underground cinema could reach a popular audience it would expose the soulless exploitation of commercial cinema and establish a new 'folk' Art of the people.³⁷³ To this end Mekas drove a dynamic, passionate and many-sided populist campaign for a democratic revolution in the cinema.

However by the late 1960s Mekas and his collaborators had reached a crisis and they responded with a fundamental revision of the project. The elements of this crisis were complex and interdependent. To begin with, by the end of the 1960s both the utopian hope of the Counterculture and the popularity of Underground Cinema had begun to wane. Up against the naked aggression of the State and the voracious appetite of consumer capitalism the Counterculture had begun to lose the momentum of its naive enthusiasm. It soon became apparent that far from succumbing to the revolutionary power of the Underground the commercial

³⁷³ For Mekas on populism see See Jonas Mekas, 'On 'People's Movies' , or the Difference Between Melodrama and Art.' (August 1964) compiled in Jonas Mekas , *Movie Journal*, Collier Books, New York.1972.(P.155-156)

cinema would simply appropriate elements of the Underground/ amateur cine style and bypass the movement. There would be no spontaneous cinema revolution, only a relentless and formidable conflict. Secondly, the open access/ non-selective policy of the Co-Op and other Underground organisations promoted ever more films and film makers but did not provide the makers with either competitive box office success or the authority of institutional taste. Meanwhile, from the mid-1960s a consolidated national framework of State Art funding, Art centres, museums and academic film study began to assume the authority of taste over experimental film and to institutionalise a canon of Art over the movement.³⁷⁴ Thirdly, the Avant-Garde tendency within the Underground began to autonomise and institutionalise themselves within Art as the new modernist/ formalist aesthetic of Structuralist Film , a process legitimated by the Avant-Garde criticism of P. Adams Sitney and Annette Michelson.³⁷⁵ Together these factors eventually persuaded Mekas to renounce the Underground and to collaborate with P. Adams Sitney , Stan Brakhage, Peter Kubelka and other key Avant-Garde makers and activists in an attempt to legitimise their authority over the experimental movement by founding an institute that would consecrate and maintain a pantheon of film Art, a hierarchy of taste and an official history. The discourse used to legitimise this shift was Avant-Garde Structuralism and the institute was the Anthology Film Archives museum founded in 1970.³⁷⁶ The foundation of Anthology marks the eclipse of the first American Underground Cinema. As J. Hoberman observed :

Opening in December 1970, the Anthology reified the avant-garde tradition, creating a fixed pantheon of filmmakers and a certified canon of masterpieces, drawing heavily upon the late efflorescence of structural film. Avant-garde cinema left the theatres and entered the classrooms. By the early 1970's, almost all of the major filmmakers (and a host of minor ones) had come in from the cold-protected species, like academic poets - to spawn a new generation of university-trained, tenure seeking filmmakers, film theorists, and film critics.³⁷⁷

The Underground project was flawed by cultural misconceptions and unreconciled

³⁷⁴ See Lauren Rabinovitz, *Ibid.* 1992.(P.279-280)

³⁷⁵ Lauren Rabinovitz, *Ibid.* 1992.(P.272-273)

³⁷⁶ See Lauren Rabinovitz, *Ibid.* 1992.(P.280-281)

³⁷⁷ J. Hoberman, *After Avant-Garde Film* from B.Wallis (ed.) *Art After Modernism* , the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.1984.(P.65).

tensions. Despite their populism and their Anti-Art rhetoric Mekas and his collaborators never really moved beyond the fetish of an eternal and redemptive Art. They failed to understand that Art was above all an institution and that the crucial problem facing the Underground was not aesthetic but industrial/economic. This crucial error allowed the Art institutions to appropriate the Underground and forced Mekas and his collaborators into the institution of Art. As Lauren Rabinovitz has observed :

.....Mekas joined with a closed circle of political allies (including Brakhage) to enshrine films in an avowedly apolitical apparatus of formalist ideology. The founding of Anthology may thus be seen as the last ritual of an avant-garde elite in the midst of being threatened and overshadowed by the larger systems of museum and university practices. It represents an attempt to mirror the apparatus of museums and archives as a means for unifying and regulating the avant-garde cinema according to the larger models of structural and ideological relations. At another level, Mekas's move away from the discourse and practice of commercialism may also be seen as an effort to secure for himself and others a toehold of power among shifting institutional and economic bases for avant-garde cinema. ³⁷⁸

The American Underground film movement of the 1960s was a complex and diffuse culture which involved many activists and makers spread throughout the States. Ironically, it was driven by both the triumphant surfacing of the American amateur experimental tradition and its subsequent professionalisation.

In spite of Anthology, Mekas never resolved his ambivalence to the conflicting tendencies of the Underground and the Avant-Garde, and when the resurgent Underground movement needed a new venue for the 5th annual New York Underground Film Festival in 1998 Mekas and his associates welcomed them into Anthology Film Archives.

³⁷⁸ Lauren Rabinovitz, *Ibid.* 1992. (P.280)

Chapter Ten

The L.F.M.C. and the First British Underground Cinema 1966-70.

The 1960s Counterculture was an international movement effectively dominated by American cultural forms, but the reception, appropriation and (re)production of these forms outside the U.S. was subject to complex local and specific cultural contexts. The influence of the American Underground Cinema movement spread internationally throughout the 1960s both as an integrated element of the Counterculture and through a series of international initiatives, tours and festivals. Following the model of the New York Co-Op similar but distinctive radical co-operative and collective organisations emerged in the late 1960s in Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, Holland, Italy, Japan, Sweden and Switzerland. But the first new film Co-Op formed in London. ³⁷⁹

The British Counterculture of the 1960s developed from American Counterculture reinterpreted through British Bohemianism, and elements of specifically British radical and popular culture. Key currents in this fusion were the Peace Movement, Rock and Roll, Trad Jazz, Folk music, Beat poetry, European Anti-Art, British Pop Art and the eccentric Music Hall comedy tradition which had been rejuvenated by the cult radio comedy of *The Goon Show* (1951-60), pop performers like Screaming Lord Sutch, The Alberts and later the Beatles and the Bonzo Dog Doodah Band. ³⁸⁰ The Bohemian costume masquerade of the British Counterculture developed as a complex interaction of various influences including American fashion, the Trad Jazz beatnik style and elements of continental European student style imported by British beat groups from Hamburg in the early 1960s. However, the overriding dynamic for British Countercultural style was the appropriation of Bohemian style by British working class youth. This was explicit in the formation of the Teddy Boy subculture of the early 1950s; the Edwardian dandy fashion of frock coats and fancy waistcoats was first marketed by Saville Row tailors for the young ruling

³⁷⁹ Steve Dwoskin, *Ibid.* 1985. (P.61.)

³⁸⁰ Jeff Nuttall, *Ibid.* 1970. (P.115-118).

class, but subsequently vulgarised by the Teds.³⁸¹ Likewise, the later Mods developed a subversive subculture of dandy style that threatened and parodied the legitimacy of bourgeois taste.

By the Spring of 1966 the London Counterculture was gearing up for the revolution. The mods were rioting at the coast, the radical student movement was beginning a cycle of sit-ins and occupations, drug use was becoming a subversive political strategy, there was a steady influx of militant draft dodgers from the U.S. and liberational movements were coalescing around radical feminism, black power, gay liberation, ecology, squatting and the commune movement. Crucially, in a nation rigidly stratified by social class, the British Counterculture was creating limited and temporary cultural social zones where the hip youth of the working class could fraternise with their bourgeois contemporaries.

The pivotal agent of the British Underground Cinema was the *London Filmmakers Co-Op* (L.F.M.C) which developed from 1965 into 1966 out of activity around rival Countercultural bookshops : *Better Books* on Charing Cross Road managed by the poet Bob Cobbing and the *Indica* book shop/ gallery on Southampton Row run by Barry Miles.³⁸² At Better Books Cobbing had set up Cinema 65, a regular Friday night film club which showed experimental/ Underground film as part of a series of events/ happenings that included work from the *Destruction In Art Symposium* and readings by poets including Ginsberg and Alexander Trocchi, the founder of the Situationist influenced Project Sigma. By the summer of 1966 the programme for Cinema 65 had become predominately open screenings and the interest of the group was expanding into film production and distribution. Meanwhile, Barry Miles was in negotiation with Barbara Rubin and Mekas in New York to develop a London Co-Op as a base for European Underground distribution. Out of this rivalry emerged the unified and independent London Filmmakers Co-Op

³⁸¹ Tony Jefferson, 'Cultural Responses of the Teds', *Cultural Studies* 7/8 Summer 1978. (P.81-86.)

³⁸² See David Curtis 'English Avant-Garde Film: An Early Chronology' published in *Studio International* (Nov./Dec. 1975) (p.176-182). also Deke Dusinberre's unpublished thesis on *the History of English Avant-Garde Film* (1974) available at the B.F.I. Library and Mark Webber, 'Chronology of Events and Developments 1966-76' in *Shoot, Shoot, Shoot* catalogue Tate Modern, 2002..

(L.F.M.C.), officially constituted in October 1966. One of the founding activities of the new Co-Op was to publish the magazine *Cinim* (1966-69), the first of a series of magazines/journals which emerged from the Co-Op/Underground movement in the late 1960s/early 1970s, including *Cinemantics*, *Afterimage* and *Cinema Rising*. The first issue of *Cinim* carried a trail blazing *Open Letter To Film-Makers of the World* from Jonas Mekas, which claimed that America was on the verge of a financially self sufficient Underground film industry with a hundred cinemas across the nation, and Underground film widely available in bookshops and record stores. From this industrial base Mekas proposed the foundation of an international Underground network based on the model of the New York Co-Op:

.....the new film-maker (and that goes for all countries) can not trust any commercial (or State; or one that is based on commercial tradition) film financing, film production, film distribution, film exhibition or film promotion set-ups and organisations. WE HAVE TO START EVERYTHING FROM SCRATCH, FROM THE BEGINNING. NO COMPROMISES, HOWEVER SMALL. [...]...I direct this Open Letter to the independent film-makers of the world, to anybody whose life is cinema, who is making and must make films - to create Film-Makers Cooperatives of your own, in your own countries. There is no other visible solution. There is no other way of escaping the grip of the commercial set ups . This net of international coops could then exchange among themselves and help each other beyond the boundaries of their own countries. The boundaries are bound to disappear anyway very soon. With the changing times, with the new spirit in the air, with communications and speed increasing,..... 383

In its formative stage the L.F.M.C. was a coalition of disparate Countercultural interests including the poet Cobbing, the activist and Underground entrepreneur Miles, British film makers including Jeff Keen and documentarist Peter Whitehead , U.S. film makers Steve Dwoskin and Simon Hartog , experimental theatre impresario Jim Haynes , critic Raymond Durnat and a number of would be film makers, most significantly a young Artist who was studying painting at the Slade school of Art : Dave Curtis. A key organiser and publicist during this period was the notorious American triple agent, McCarthy stooge, fixer and stand up comedian Harvey Matusow. 384 The early L.F.M.C. based its organisational structure on the open access New York Co-Op , and as it developed, it negotiated with Mekas and his colleagues for institutional support and access to the New

383 Jonas Mekas , 'Open Letter To Film-Makers of the World', *Cinim* 1. 1966.

384 See David Zane Mairowitz, *Ibid.* 1976.(P.137-141.

York distribution catalogue. However, communication between the two Co-Ops was intermittent and often fraught, and this tension was aggravated by the presence of the renegade Matusow who eventually left amid allegations of theft in February 1967. At its formation the L.F.M.C had about 50 members but very few films to distribute and it essentially functioned as an open screening group, and as a distribution/ exhibition agency for American Underground cinema. Over the following 18 months the distribution catalogue rapidly expanded to around a hundred films , but this was mostly American imports, British based Underground film making was limited to a precious few including work from Dwoskin, Keen, Hartog, John Latham, David Larcher, Anthony Scott, the Tattooists and Anthony Balch.

Haynes and Miles were also two of the key founders of London's first weekly Underground newspaper the *International Times*' (IT) and so two weeks after its formation the Co-Op staged its first official screening at the IT launch party at the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm. This celebrated event was essentially a free gig in a vast cavernous and derelict Victorian engine house, where, amongst the rubble, the Soft Machine and the Pink Floyd played to the stoned first wave of the London Counterculture. Above the rickety stage, the L.F.M.C. projected films onto sheets hung on a clothes line.³⁸⁵ The films screened included work by Keen, Dwoskin, Latham and *Towers Open Fire* (11 mins.), a collaboration between the British film maker and distributor Anthony Balch, William Burroughs and painter Brion Gysin. ³⁸⁶ 'Towers Open Fire' was shot between 1961-2 in Paris and Gibraltar, a year later the same team made *The Cut Ups* (20 mins.) in Paris, New York and Tangiers. *The Cut Ups* used a cinematic variant of Burroughs aleatory montage technique. During 1966 Balch managed to get both films exhibited in commercial, West End London cinemas. Throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s he developed further projects with Burroughs and directed two low budget

³⁸⁵ See Mick Farren, *Give The Anarchist A Cigarette*, Jonathon Cape, London. 2001. (P.70-76)

³⁸⁶ See Jack Sargeant, *The Naked Lens : An Illustrated History of Beat Cinema* , Creation Books, London.1997..(P. 169-183). also Rob Bridgett, *An Appraisal of the Films of William Burroughs, Brion Gysin and Anthony Balch in Terms of recent Avant Garde Theory and History*. 2001. at www.sound.design.org.uk/burroughs

exploitation features which also carry the Burroughs mark : *Secrets of Sex* (1969) and *Horror Hospital* (1973).³⁸⁷

From Halloween to Bonfire Night 1966 the L.F.M.C. staged the six day Spontaneous Festival of Underground Film at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre which screened both American Underground work and films by Keen, Dwoskin and Balch, and which also included six nights of open screenings at Better Books.³⁸⁸ Meanwhile , that summer there had been a night of Underground film at the first Notting Hill Fayre, a festival organised by the London Free School and coordinated by the Countercultural impresario John *Hoppy* Hopkins. From this festival Hopkins and Joe Boyd initiated the U.F.O. or Underground Freak Out Club , an all night psychedelic acid venue on Tottenham Court Road. Until it closed in October 1967, the U.F.O. served as a rallying point for the expanding Counterculture and a provisional venue for the Underground Cinema movement. Hopkins was also a co-founder of the *International Times*, and so the U.F.O. and IT developed a reciprocal marketing relationship comparable to the Bohemian cabaret model. At the U.F.O, visiting American Underground makers could screen their work, *Flaming Creatures* was first screened in Britain, the first London light shows took place there, and Dave Curtis and others projected film loops and found footage to the playing of *Pink Floyd*, *Procul Harum*, *Tomorrow*, *the Crazy World of Arthur Brown* and *the Soft Machine*. Under U.F.O. influence two vast all night happenings were staged fusing live music, lights shows, film and thousands of stoned youth : the first was the 14 Hour *Technicolour Dream* which took place at Alexandra Palace, and the second was *Christmas on Earth Revisited* at Olympia. After the closure of the U.F.O. other psychedelic clubs emerged, crucially the Middle Earth Club in Covent Garden which took on the pivotal role of the defunct U.F.O. , and which also functioned as a provisional venue for Underground films.

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³⁸⁷ Jack Sargeant, *Ibid.* 1997..(P.174-175).

³⁸⁸ Mark Webber, *Ibid.* 2002..(P.6) also see Elizabeth Nelson *The British Counter - Culture 1966-73*, Macmillan, London.1989.

³⁸⁹ For a description of the psychedelic subculture see for instance Richard Neville, *Playpower*, Paladin, London.1971.(P.24-31)

The L.F.M.C. continued to hold regular screenings at Better Books until October 1967 when new management sacked Cobbing and kicked out the Co-Op. From this displacement onwards the Co-Op was increasingly riven with dissent and personality clashes and this conflict eventually began to polarise around a split between two opposing factions. The older Better Books faction came from an heterogeneous Beat background and believed that the L.F.M.C should primarily promote Underground cinema by developing an Underground film culture through exhibition, distribution and critical publishing. This group included Cobbing, Dwoskin, Hartog and Durgnat. The new younger group were increasingly Artists or Art students who although they were active in the radical Counterculture actually had no interest in popular cinema or positively despised it. This group maintained that the Co-Op should shift its primary activity from exhibition/distribution to production and become an organisation exclusively for film makers, which could provide production, film processing and post-production equipment and facilities. ³⁹⁰ This new faction was based at the Arts Lab on Drury Lane and it came to include Dave Curtis, the American film maker Peter Gidal, the painter, film maker and Art Lecturer Malcolm Le Grice, and a group of his students from St Martins School of Art. The London Arts Lab was set up in September 1967 by Jim Haynes and another American, Jack Henry Moore, as a Countercultural arts complex housing a theatre, gallery, cinema, restaurant, book shop, studio, workshop space and general crash pad. ³⁹¹ Haynes had been the founder of the Traverse theatre in Edinburgh and the Arts Lab became a seminal base for many of the key companies of the British fringe theatre movement, including the People Show, Pip Simmons, Portable and Freehold. ³⁹² Following the example of London and later Brighton, Arts Labs were set up all over the country, by 1969 over 150 were operating. The Drury Lane Arts Lab Cinema was set up by Moore and run by Dave Curtis, it held screenings six nights a week, mixing Underground film with Avant-Garde, cult and European features. With the Better Books faction of the Co-Op in exile, the Arts Lab became the centre of

Underground film activity and this reinforced the ascendance of the new faction,

³⁹⁰ See Deke Dusinberre, *Ibid.* (1974)(P.40-42)

³⁹¹ See Mick Farren, *Ibid.* (2001.) (P. 119-121.)

³⁹² See Sandy Craig, 'Reflexes of the Future : the Beginnings of the Fringe' in Sandy Craig (ed.) *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, Amber Lane Press 1980.(P.15-16)

which began to construct printing and processing equipment at the Arts Lab under the direction of Le Grice.

Around this time Anthony *Scotty* Scott began to splice together his *The Longest Most Meaningless Movie in the World*, an endless, always growing, random montage of discarded footage and out-takes, which was eventually screened at the Arts Lab as a continuous loop :

...we moved the projector down into the main gallery and set up a screen so you could see the image backprojected when you went in and could sit and watch it right way round from the coffee-shop and theatre entrance. One of the reels consisted of about forty identical repetitions of Donald Campbell advertising a boys' adventure magazine with his Bluebird on his desk. After a few times round regular meaningless moviegoers began to learn his script by heart and would snap to from their bored inertia to chant 'Hello fellas, my name's Donald Campbell. Now HERE'S a magazine for everyone who likes adventCHA' etc. Audience participation got quite exciting one night when someone leapt at the screen with a knife, tore a slit in it and leapt through and outside.³⁹³

Meanwhile, in March 1967 a wave of college occupations began at the London School of Economics and spread rapidly to Leicester, Essex and across the nation. There were Underground film screenings and psychedelic happenings at the Electric Cinema Club in Portobello Road and Derek Hill founded his itinerant New Cinema Club, which moved around a series of venues including the Mermaid Theatre, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and The Place (off Euston Road). Under the slogan the Forbidden Film Festival the club screened uncertificated features, Underground Cinema, Agit-Prop documentaries, Japanese, continental and Latin American cinema.³⁹⁴

In the Spring of 1968 the American critic P.Adams Sitney embarked on a highly influential 12 city university tour with a comprehensive retrospective of American Underground cinema organised by Curtis and Hartog. In response to the tour a number of key activists and groups emerged from the Universities including film

³⁹³ Anthony Scott, 'The Longest Most Meaningless Movie in the World', *Cinema*, October 1969.

³⁹⁴ For Derek Hill and the New Cinema see 'Derek Hill Interviewed' by David Prothero in *the Journal of Popular British Cinema* No.2/2000. also 'Independent Film-Making in The 70's' by the Organising Committee for the I.F.A. Conference May 1976, in Margaret Dickinson, *Ibid.* 1999.(P.130-131.). also Albie Thoms, *Polemics for A New Cinema*, Wild and Woolley, Sydney. (P.30.)

makers Tony Rayns, Roger Hammond and John Du Cane at Cambridge, Philip Drummond, Tim Cawkwell and Tim Harding at Oxford and the activists and critics Peter Sainsbury and Simon Field at Essex. Rayns became a leading Independent film critic, Hammond and Du Cane later became active in the L.F.M.C. Avant-Garde, and Field and Sainsbury founded the highly influential Independent film journal *Afterimage* (1970).

Contiguous to the development of the L.F.M.C. and inspired by revolutionary action in Paris, Derry and Chicago, and the radical American Newsreel movement, the Italian Cinegiornale and the French Cinetracts, British film makers began to form Agit-Prop documentary film collectives. These included *Cinema Action* (1968), *Angry Arts Cinema Club* (1968), *Amber* (1968) and later *the Berwick Street Collective* (1970), *the London Women's Film Group* (1972), *Four Corners* (1973) and *Newsreel* (1974). In May 1968 a debate at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) on the possible formation of a *Parallel Cinema* distribution network attracted many of the key Underground activists including Hill, the Electric Cinema Club, the Tattooists International, Angry Arts and Marc Karlin of Cinema Action. From this gathering Peter Sainsbury and his colleagues eventually set up the influential Other Cinema distribution group in 1970 which distributed experimental features from makers such as Godard and Herzog, Latin American and Third Cinema, and Underground and experimental shorts, to film societies, colleges and the growing national network of film workshops and collectives.

Also in May 1968, the students, and a radical faction of the staff of Hornsey College of Art in North London, began a six week sit-in occupation.³⁹⁵ This action began as a protest against the antiquated and bureaucratic conditions at the college but rapidly escalated into a utopian experiment in student autonomy and non-hierarchical education. In their brief liberty, the Hornsey radicals collectively and practically challenged the ideological and institutional legitimacy of Art. As one student recounts in the collective narrative of the occupation :

From the very beginning of my art training I was taught to appreciate that type of art which is recognised by the 'educated' part of our society to be

³⁹⁵ Students and Staff of Hornsey College of Art, *The Hornsey Affair*, Penguin Books Ltd. Harmondsworth. 1969..

'good art'. I was taught to revere the old masters and the Impressionists, and gradually, through the process of education, I acquired an admiration for the modern movements in painting and sculpture, which I mistakenly believed to be a form of cultural revolution. For a total of five years, first in grammar school, later in art school, I was made to accept and believe that the standards and criteria of great art were the standards and criteria recognised and accepted by that 'educated' section of society, and that mass culture, if there is such a thing, is something to be scorned as being unrefined, commercialised and base. Simply we have 'good art' and 'bad art'. The good art is the art of intelligent, enlightened, sensitive minority of the population, and the bad art is the art of the unfortunate, unenlightened working class. [...] I say shit on their art world, I want nothing of it. ³⁹⁶

An integrated component of the occupation was subverting cinema, almost every night of the occupation the college canteen became a convivial cinema screening hired features and Underground film till 3 a.m. in the morning. For variation the films would be shown backwards, sideways or freeze framed at decisive moments. One fine evening a film was projected out onto trees, houses and inflatable structures. ³⁹⁷ After inconclusive negotiations with the students, the authorities closed the college in early July. When it reopened in November, the students were systematically humbled, the radical staff were sacked and the premises were refurbished with comprehensive security devices.

By Spring 1968 both internal and American influence had convinced the rival factions of the L.F.M.C. to attempt a reconciliation and Le Grice and Hartog drew up a joint constitution which aimed to unite the two projects. ³⁹⁸

The fundamental points of the constitution were:

1. Dedication to the production, distribution and screening of independent film.
2. Open collective democratic membership structure based on General Meetings at which a governing Executive Committee is elected by the membership.

³⁹⁶ (K.H.) Students and Staff of Hornsey College of Art, Ibid. 1969.(P.70-71)

³⁹⁷ Students and Staff of Hornsey College of Art, Ibid. 1969.(P.66-67)

³⁹⁸ See Malcolm Le Grice,(1986) 'A Reflection on the History of the London Film Makers' Co-Op', *L.F.M.C. Catalogue*, London. 1993. (P.163)

3. The membership would continue to include both film makers and non-makers ('viewing membership').
4. Non-profit making / common ownership.
5. Open access distribution.
6. Commitment to promoting all the films in distribution equally and non-selectively.

However, the reconciliation was only partially successful and conflict continued, first over the prospect of State funding for the Co-Op and second concerning New York authority over the L.F.M.C .

Throughout 1968 the Arts Lab film makers developed primitive printing / processing facilities , this was provisionally motivated first by the prohibitive cost of commercial facilities and second because the commercial labs would censor by confiscation any material they deemed subversive. However, from a broader perspective, the shift towards the control of printing / processing must be understood as a shift towards the development of a film practice based on an individual, manual and fetishistic relationship between the material of film and the film maker ; an Art of film. Le Grice was at this time teaching Art at Goldsmiths College and St Martins School of Art and many of his students subsequently joined the Co-Op and used the facilities. A group of these were later to form the substantial core of the 70s Avant Garde, including Annabel Nicholson, Gill Eatherley, Mike Dunford, Fred Drummond, Marilyn Halford, David Crosswaite, John Du Cane, Roger Hammond, Stuart Pound and William Raban. Around June 1968 the American film maker Peter Gidal arrived in London to study at the Royal College of Art. A few weeks later he joined the L.F.M.C. and in July he screened his proto Structuralist film *Room (Double Take)* (1967) at the Arts Lab ; according to Le Grice this screening was a *revelation* for the British movement. ³⁹⁹

³⁹⁹ Malcolm Le Grice,(1969) entry for *Room (Double Take)* (1967) in the *L.F.M.C. Catalogue 1978* (P. 21).

Initially Curtis and Le Grice were ambivalent to the concept of State funding for Underground cinema. In the first years of the L.F.M.C the only consistent State funding for experimental film came from the B.F.I. Experimental Film Fund. However in the summer of 1968 the Arts Council began considering a proposal for a film sub-committee of their Art funding panel. In response to this proposal Curtis wrote a *Report on Subsidy to Independent Film-makers* which he presented to executives at the Arts Council and the B.F.I.⁴⁰⁰ This report called for an end to State production funding for all non-professional film makers, since :

It is surely impossible to judge which, say out of fifty young people, about to make their first serious film, should receive a grant, unless one imposes a set of arbitrary conditions — such as 'scenarios in triplicate should be submitted accompanied by a letter of recommendation from...' etc... and then imposing personal aesthetic decision on written evidence. The sole justification for spending public money on the arts is that it should make possible a wider spectrum of cultural events than private and commercial interests would themselves initiate. While the sources of public money are so few it is difficult for such a spectrum to be adequately represented...⁴⁰¹

Instead of production funding Curtis proposed that the B.F.I. and the Arts Council embark upon a programme of State funding for independent exhibition, (particularly open screenings) , distribution and co-operative/collective production groups such as the L.F.M.C. Subsequently, Curtis and Le Grice approached the B.F.I. to fund production at the Arts Lab, despite strong opposition from Hartog and Dwoskin,

In November the Arts Lab closed amid accusations of financial mismanagement, and the Co-Op moved around temporary bases including the offices of The Binary Information Transfer in Notting Hill Gate. B.I.T. was a Countercultural agency which coordinated news and information on agitation, the Arts Lab movement, drug culture, communes etc.⁴⁰² Without a permanent base the Co-Op held irregular screenings at the Electric Cinema Club. Meanwhile, the conflict between the two factions broke out again over the appointment of Carla Liss as the paid secretary of the L.F.M.C. Liss was an American Artist and friend of Mekas who

⁴⁰⁰ See Deke Dusinberre, *Ibid.* (1974)(Appendix IV)(P.229-235)

⁴⁰¹ Included as Appendix IV in Deke Dusinberre's unpublished thesis on the 'History of English Avant-Garde Film' (1974).

⁴⁰² David Curtis, *Ibid.* (Nov./Dec. 1975) (P.160)

had met Curtis and become active in the L.F.M.C organisation around the Summer of 1968. ⁴⁰³ In November that year she met with Mekas in New York and he agreed to give L.F.M.C distribution the films from the Sitney Underground tour, on condition that Liss would manage them. The Cobbing faction took exception to this intervention and called an Extraordinary General Meeting at which Cobbing, Latham and others resigned. Dwoskin and Hartog stayed on until May 1969 ; when they left, the Arts Lab faction essentially gained complete control over the L.F.M.C.

In the autumn of 1969 the LFMC established a permanent base at a new arts lab project called the *Institute for Research and Technology* (I.R.A.T. Oct. 69 - March 71) in Camden. The I.R.A.T cinema under the direction of Curtis seated over a hundred, and had nightly screenings and often two shows a night. ⁴⁰⁴ The programme was predominately Underground Cinema, but there were also open screenings, independent shorts, student work, classic Hollywood, and European Avant-Garde retrospectives. Although the London Underground scene was still effectively dominated by imported work from America, from the opening of the Arts Lab to the I.R.A.T. a new British filmmaking culture developed, the percentage of British work screened amongst the American steadily increased, and most of this work was produced on Co-Op facilities ; by 1970 professional printing and processing equipment was installed at the I.R.A.T.

Amongst the special events at the I.R.A.T. cinema were programmes from the Oxford New Cinema Club including films by Tony Rayns, Andrew Barnett and Robert Short, and programmes from Australian, Italian and French film co-ops. ⁴⁰⁵ The I.R.A.T. cinema hosted Derek Hill's New Cinema Club , which amongst its eclectic mix, screened work by Dwoskin and notably Pat Holland's *The Hornsey Film*, an Agit-Prop documentary about the occupation of Hornsey Art School. The I.R.A.T. was also the base for John Hopkins' TVX , the first British public access

⁴⁰³ Mark Webber, *Ibid.* 2002.(P.6)

⁴⁰⁴ Unpublished programme of the New Arts Lab cinema prepared by Mark Webber 2002.

⁴⁰⁵ A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, BFI Publishing London. 1999. (P.88.)

and community video workshop. Hopkins also organised the first video Art festival at the Camden Arts Festival, May 1969.

In September 1970 the Co-Op, the I.R.A.T. and a group of independent film distributors organised the International Underground Film Festival at the National Film Theatre. The festival was open and included work from Britain, Europe, Australia, Canada and the U.S.A. The British entry included work from David Larcher, Eyeball Films, Mike Leggett, Graeme Ewens, Tim Harding, Tim Caukwell, Philip Drummond, Al Deval, Letty Naisner, Barbara Schwartz, Tony Rayns, Fred Drummond, Curtis, Dwoskin, Dunford, Le Grice, Hartog, Keen and TVX.⁴⁰⁶ But this was effectively the last year of the Underground, after 1970 the term *Underground* was resolutely dropped by the movement and replaced with *Avant-Garde* and *Independent* by the agencies and the journals of the movement.⁴⁰⁷ Moreover, the shift in nomenclature was a component of a deeper ideological and institutional shift away from the popular anarchy of the Counterculture and towards the legitimacy of Art and the State.

In January 1971 the I.R.A.T. closed and the Co-Op sought new premises, eventually moving to an old dairy on Prince of Wales Crescent, Camden. It was here, isolated in its own self contained institute that the Avant-Garde production/processing project became completely dominant. Curtis stopped programming and the new Co-Op cinema was run by Peter Gidal, who was to become the principal theorist of British Avant-Garde Structuralist film. Screenings declined to twice a week and often once a week, seasons and retrospectives were dropped and regular screenings became dominated by the latest work or work in progress.

As the 1970s wore on, the days of the Underground faded into adolescent memory and the Co-Op Avant-Garde assimilated itself into the institutions of Art. There were Art gallery screenings at the Walker Gallery in Liverpool, in London

⁴⁰⁶ See the festival programme in *Time Out* No.46 September 1970.

⁴⁰⁷ A key example of this shift is the rejection of *Underground* as a term in the Avant-Garde issue of *Afterimage* No.2 Autumn 1970.

at the Serpentine Gallery, and eventually at the Tate and the Hayward. Art schools introduced film making courses and many Co-Op film makers became tutors; Ron Haselden at Reading, Mike Leggett at Exeter, Guy Sherwin at the N.E. London Poly, David Hall, Tony Sinden and Jeff Keen at Maidstone, Anne -Rees Mogg at Chelsea, Peter Gidal and Steve Dwoskin at the Royal College of Art. ⁴⁰⁸ From the mid-1970s the Art schools and colleges effectively became the established and sanctioned institutional infrastructure of the Co-Op Avant-Garde ; the primary venues for distribution/exhibition, the key source of new membership and the only dependable employment for established members as tutors and lecturers. ⁴⁰⁹ The B.F.I. and the Arts Council began during this period to recognise the Avant-Garde and fund its film makers. Around 1973 the Arts Council Artists Film Sub-Committee was established, and in 1975 the Co-Op received its first major B.F.I. grant for further production facilities. In the late 1970s Dave Curtis became the Assistant Film Officer at the Arts Council and he effectively co-ordinated State funding for Avant-Garde film and video for the next 25 years. The L.F.M.C. proved to be more enduring, and more radical in its organisational structure than the New York Co-Op which inspired its formation.⁴¹⁰ The principles of democracy, common ownership and open access laid out in the constitution of 1968 were extended in the 1970s to film production resources, education and employment of staff. Nevertheless, the institutional history of the Co-Op was a process of gradual and intermittent normalisation and professionalisation substantially driven by the requirements of the State funding agencies, on which it became totally dependent. In the mid 1970s it became a registered charity, a public limited company, and it began to employ paid staff. In the late 1980s it dropped the non-selection equal distribution policy. In 1991 the constitution was revised to create a binary class membership system of *core* members with voting rights and 'access' members without votes. Finally, in 1996 the Co-Op annulled itself into a

⁴⁰⁸ David Curtis, 'English Avant-Garde Film: An Early Chronology' published in *Studio International* (Nov./Dec. 1975) (p.182)

⁴⁰⁹ See the revised version of David Curtis, 'English Avant-Garde Film: An Early Chronology' in the catalogue *A Perspective on English Avant-Garde Film*, the Arts Council of Great Britain, London. 1978.. (P.17)

⁴¹⁰ See David Curtis, 'A Tale Of Two Co-Ops' in David E. James *To Free the Cinema*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1992.. (P.253-265.)

normalised hierarchical management structure as a condition of the move to the Lux.

The post-war Independent film and video movement formed in the early 1970s as a coalition of the L.F.M.C. Avant-Garde, the radical Agit-Prop collectives, independent distributors such as the Other Cinema and an emergent network of regional film and video workshops : including Amber formed in Newcastle 1968 , Chapter Video Workshop formed in Cardiff 1974, the Sheffield Co-Op formed 1975 and the Manchester Film and Video Workshop formed 1977. A key component of the Independent movement was a group of pioneer film Theorists who were also writing for the emergent journals of academic film studies, crucially *Screen* , the seminal Theoretical journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT), which was effectively funded and published by the B.F.I. Education Department. In 1974 the Independent Filmmakers Association (I.F.A.) was formed to represent the interests of a broad group of Independent makers and by the late 1970s it had become the principal national co-ordinating and policy making agency of the movement. ⁴¹¹ The Independent Video Association (I.V.A.) was formed in 1975 and the two organisations were eventually merged in 1983 to become the Independent Film and Video Association (I.F.V.A.).

The Independent video movement effectively began with TVX at the I.R.A.T. Although both video practitioners and Theorists have tended to emphasise the difference and specificity of the medium, the actual development of Independent video had close and reciprocal links with Independent film and followed a parallel and contiguous historical development. Like Independent film, the Independent video sector developed as a coalition of forces structured around an industrial/ideological polarity between Agit-prop/ community practice and an Avant-Garde : Video Art. What is most significant in this context is that whilst the Co-Op Avant-Garde at least bore the shadow of an engagement with the amateur, anarchic and popular Counterculture, Video Art emerged directly from

⁴¹¹ Margaret Dickinson, *Ibid.* 1999.(P.48-50.)

the Art institutions as an autonomous Art. The key reasons for this immaculate conception are first, that the Co-Op Avant-Garde had already pioneered the institutionalisation of the moving image as a legitimate Art. Second, that unlike Avant-Garde film, British Video Art developed before the advent of an equivalent amateur industry or culture, when individual access to video production and exhibition technology was limited to a few legitimate institutions, crucially Art schools and notably Maidstone, Coventry, Brighton and St Martins.⁴¹² And third, that as a gallery object and auratic commodity, the discrete and luminous video monitor proved far more adaptable to the culture of Art than the ephemeral and vulgar projections of the cinema.

The Independent movement and its cluster of representative organisations were frequently divided by passionate political debate and dissent, nevertheless, the historical trajectory of the movement was constituted on the absolute assumption that Independent cinema was defined by an *autonomy* from the *mainstream* commercial industry maintained and legitimised by State funding.⁴¹³ This assumption was underpinned and maintained by a complex nexus of State Socialism and the historical momentum of the bourgeois nationalisation of Art culture. Historical precedents had been set by the Documentary Movement, the B.B.C. , the B.F.I. and the Arts Council. Ideologically, the paradox of an autonomous and legitimate State film industry was facilitated by a fusion of Griersonian notions of the social function of cinema and the post-war Socialist strategy for a nationalised cinema. Following this trajectory the movement developed as a semi-autonomous industrial sector which was almost totally dependent on State funding and which had key agents and agencies within the authority and institutions of the State. The cardinal strategies of the Independent sector as it advanced into the 1980s were, first to steadily increase the State funding and co-ordination of Independent film and video, second to campaign for *professional recognition by both the State and the trade unions*, and last, to develop

⁴¹² Julia Knight, 'A Chronological Guide to British Video Art' in Julia Knight (ed.) *Diverse Practices*, University of Luton Press, Luton, Bedfordshire. 1996.(P. 351-358)

⁴¹³ The first I.F.A. annual general meeting was actually funded by the B.F.I. and the Association eventually folded in 1990 when its B.F.I. funding was withdrawn. See Jonathon Curling and Fran McLean, The Independent Film-makers Association - Annual General Meeting and Conference, Screen Vol.18 No.1 1977. See also the founding document of the I.F.A. : the Organising Committee for the IFA Conference May 1976 (Simon Hartog, Marc Karlin, Claire Johnston, Paul Willemen and Steve Dwoskin etc.) *Independent Film-Making in the 70's*, London I.F.A. 1976.

an ideological and industrial stake in the formation of the new State mandated national television station Channel Four , which began broadcasting in 1982. These strategies of inclusion inevitably and ironically eroded, and finally destroyed the institutional *independence* of the Independent movement. Furthermore, this disintegration was compounded by a shift within the sector, from a broad Leftist ideology, to a new pluralist politics of identity and difference , which promoted the devolution of the sector into specialised workshops, agencies and initiatives designed to enfranchise social groups excluded from the mainstream media : Women's film and video, Black film and video, Gay and Lesbian film and video, Asian film etc. Whilst this shift was principally initiated by radical film makers, as an element of State film policy it was driven by strategic tokenism, liberal guilt and cultural essentialism , and its crucial institutional effect was to force funding applicants to compete against each as the delegates of rival marginalised subjectivities. ⁴¹⁴ By the late 1980s the Independent movement had professionalised and fragmented into freelance commercial television production serving the expanding and deregulated media industries. What survived into the 1990s was the vestigial infrastructure of State film and video funding plus the only component of the Independent sector that was ideologically and industrially irreconcilable to commerce : Avant-Garde film, and Video Art. The disintegration of the Independent movement liberated the Avant-Garde from both the paradox of *independence* as a political ideology and the conflicting discourses of the diverse Independent coalition, but it also threatened the very legitimacy of the Avant-Garde as a State sanctioned and funded culture, since it became increasingly untenable to legitimise the Avant-Garde as a crucial component of Independent film and video culture. The solution to this crisis was to finally relinquish all pretensions to radical opposition and to embrace the terminology first deployed by the Arts Council in the early 1970s : *Artists Film and Video*.

⁴¹⁴ Margaret Dickinson, *ibid.* 1999.(P.72-73)

Chapter Eleven

Radical Theory and its Practice : A Demystification.

The development of the new British Avant-Garde depended upon the formation of two discrete but integrated and interdependent sectors of activity: practice (film making/ cinema) and Theory (education/ publishing). Whereas Underground film had been a heterogeneous and vulgar hybrid, the L.F.M.C. Avant-Garde developed a practice which was essentially an Art handicraft for the production of film. This practice was broadly Theorised as Structural or Structural-Materialist film and its key Theorist was the film maker Peter Gidal. But before we can address this arcane creed, the development of the Avant-Garde and Avant-Garde Theory must also be understood as a contiguous and interactive element of the foundation of radical film/ cultural Theory in the 1970s. This chapter will trace and contextualise a broad history of film/ cultural Theory into the Art/Non-Art binary.

British Theory developed from the synthesis of two distinct, apparently conflicting, but contiguous critical currents which both had roots in the Art/ non-Art binary, Leavisite literary criticism and Mathew Arnold's conception of the crisis in culture.⁴¹⁵ The first of these currents was Cultural Studies, and its development can be traced from Leavis through to Mass Observation, the post-war adult education movement, the work of Richard Hoggart, E.P.Thompson, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies founded in 1964, and the journal *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, first published in 1971.⁴¹⁶ Whilst Cultural Studies was initiated in the context of literary criticism and social history, it developed into the 1970s as a hybrid discipline which combined Marxist politics and sociological research with a detailed theoretical analysis of popular culture. As a radical critique Cultural

⁴¹⁵ A critical intersection of the two currents was the *New Left Review* since it served as a key agent in the development of both currents, moreover, the internal editorial coup of 1962 can be conceived as the temporary eclipse of the Cultural Studies tendency by the new Structuralist faction.

⁴¹⁶ For the roots of Cultural Studies in the post-war adult education movement see Tom Steele, *The Emergence of Cultural Studies 1945-65*, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1997.

Studies commenced from Hoggart's conception of the conflict between the authentic and organic folk culture of the working class, and the repressive pseudo pop culture of mass production. This conception was then reconfigured and structured by theories of hegemony drawn from the work of Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School.

The second current was auteur Structuralism which was developed by pioneering Leftist film critics, teachers and activists in the B.F.I. Education Department and the journal *Screen*, principally Peter Wollen, Paul Willeman, Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Jim Kitses, Ben Brewster and Alan Lovell. As we have seen, the conception of the film director as author can be traced from the Avant-Garde of the 1920s, through to *Sequence* in the late 1940s. However, the decisive deployment of Auteurism was the polemical *politique des auteurs* expounded in the French journal *Cahiers Du Cinema* in the mid 1950s. British Auteurism was inspired and enhanced by the *Cahiers politique* and by Andrew Sarris' reformulation of the *politique* which first appeared in *Film Culture* in the early 1960s as the *auteur theory*. The crucial agent in the development of British Auteurism was the influential journal *Movie*, first published in 1962. Following the trajectory initiated by *Sequence*, *Movie* synthesised Leavisite literary techniques with auteur film criticism, but it shifted the field of study from predominately European Art-cinema to Hollywood and popular cinema. Whilst this strategy recognised the critical significance of popular cinema and revitalised British film criticism, in the context of the historical Art/non-Art binary, it should be understood as an initiative to extend the authority of Art into the popular : the desire to aestheticise the popular. This paradoxical project inevitably created progressive critical tensions and instabilities.

Following the revolutionary political events of the late 1960s, and radical developments in French critical theory, a new generation of film intellectuals sought new theoretical strategies that would reconcile auteurism with radical activism and the collective, multiple and industrial and production of popular cinema : the auteur Structuralists. The essential core of this revision was first to legitimise auteurism by adopting methodological strategies from the social

sciences, second, to recast the auteur from an auratic Artist to a theoretical construct, and third, to shift the production of meaning from the auteur to the cinematic *text*. The critical strategies of auteur Structuralism were abstracted from the Structural Anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, the revisionist Marxism of Althusser, the Semiotics of Barthes and Metz, and Lacan's revision of Freudian psychoanalysis. However, as Structuralist Theory developed into the late 1970s and early 1980s, cumulative waves of continental critical thought provided the (Post)Structuralist project with new models : Post-Marxism, Second Generation Feminism, Postmodernism etc.

From the B.F.I. Education Department and the highly influential groundwork of *Screen*, the (Post)Structuralists led the institutionalisation of academic Film Studies into the Universities. In a parallel development, Cultural Studies expanded into the Universities through the Social Sciences, and notably through the open access/B.B.C. broadcast Open University founded in 1969. Film/cultural Theory developed from the historical interaction of these two critical currents and its influence extended from the late 1970s into the academic departments of Film Studies, Communications, Media Studies, Television Studies, Broadcast Media, Lens Based Media, Multimedia, Time Based Media, Visual Arts, Digital Art etc. Moreover, this expansion was not only horizontal but also vertical up into the professional research departments of the Universities and down into the Colleges of Further Education and eventually the Secondary Schools. Internationally, British film/cultural Theory served as a pioneering model for the establishment of Theoretical movements and institutions in America, Australia and other key Anglophone nations.

The conceptual development of film/cultural Theory can be tracked through the ascent of (Post)Structuralism to its supercession and integration into a broader Theory predominately informed by contemporary Cultural Studies.⁴¹⁷ The crucial concern of (Post)Structuralist Theory was to analyse the ideological, social

⁴¹⁷ This brief conceptual outline is drawn from David Bordwell's incisive critique of the irrationality of Theory. David Bordwell, 'Contemporary Film Theory and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory' in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds.), *Post-Theory : Reconstructing Film Studies*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin. 1996. (P.3-37).

and psychic positioning of the subject in popular film. Cinema was theorised as language, a semiotic system, each film a text which used codes and conventions to fabricate a cinematic reality. It was conceived that in mainstream cinema the split and alienated *subject* of bourgeois capitalist patriarchy was constructed as a unified whole ; mainstream popular cinema was conceived as essentially a repressive ideological apparatus. Consequently, oppositional film in the context of (Post) Structuralism was film which subverted this ideological apparatus.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s (Post)Structuralism dominated film Theory but by the late 1980s it had been superseded by the diverse elements of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies conceived the *individual* as a far more active social agent than the *subject* of (Post)Structuralism. Their *subjectivity* was not totally locked into a repressive system of representation, they had the ability to make resistant or even subversive readings of the mainstream. Cultural Studies shifted the emphasis from the text to the reception of the text, the reader, and the use the reader makes of the text. Instead of the Grand Narratives of history, Cultural Studies offered *micro-histories* and *subcultures*. This subcultural approach was given a passionate momentum by feminist, working class , queer, black, and Asian Theorists who developed radical models of cultural identity and resistance.

Both Theoretical traditions considered themselves as radical doctrines engaged in demystifying the repressive mechanisms of popular culture. Moreover, despite the shift from (Post)Structuralism to Cultural Studies, elements and agents of both critical currents are active in contemporary Theory.

The supposed radicalism and social engagement of Theory depends upon the core concept of demystification. Demystification can only be understood in the historical context of the revolutionary activism of the 1960s, specifically in the context of the international student protest and occupation of the colleges and universities in the late 1960s. The impact of this student *Revolution* on Left intellectuals and academics can hardly be overestimated. In the brief and glorious

days of the occupations it seemed that change was irreversible and inevitable, the academy was the vanguard of the revolution and the workers would follow. 418

The momentum of the student revolution was provoked, exploited and conceptualised by various groups of ultra left and anarchist activists worldwide (the Provos, the Yippies etc.). The most subversive theorisation was devised by the Situationist International who were directly involved in the agitation and provocation which led to the Paris student revolt of May 1968. Effectively the Situationists developed a practice of cultural intervention and sabotage based on an inversion of the Marxist doctrine which held that the cultural superstructure of society is determined by its economic base. According to this perception advanced Western capitalism had reached the stage at which social/ cultural life had been replaced by the Spectacle , the hegemonic realm of mass media, false consciousness, consumption and alienation in which all separation appears as a natural unity. The revolutionary project of the Situationists was not to take control of the means of production, it was to liberate everyday life, beginning with their own lives. To this end they designed cultural techniques, events and products which would subvert the Spectacle. This praxis of hegemonic sabotage had a profound influence on French filmmakers and intellectuals during, and in the aftermath of May 1968, notably Godard, Baudrillard, Lyotard and Foucault who were themselves active in the strikes and occupations.

In Paris the student revolution culminated in attempts to seize control of the production of culture. From the film industry a coalition of critics from *Cahiers Du Cinema*, trade unions, leading actors and directors attempted to liberate cinema. This coalition constituted itself as the Estates General Du Cinema (E. G. C.), named after the revolutionary parliament of 1789, and they met in the hall of the

418 In the accounts written by activists in the actions at Berkeley, Berlin, Nanterre, Paris and in London at Hornsey Art School, there is a beatific wonder in the utopian possibilities of the liberated Academy. The divisions between students, teachers, non-teaching staff and the wider community would be swept away, decision making would become open, equal, democratic and collective, the syllabus would be replaced with a new flexible and organic process, education would be revolutionary, it would serve the revolution.

occupied Film and Photography School of the Sorbonne. 419 The declared project of the E. G. C. was to destroy the existing structures of the French film industry and to create a new non-capitalist industry, the model proposed for this new industry was State funded Art.

What eventually emerged from the E.G.C. and the radical film culture of May 1968 was a generation of cultural activists who sought to integrate Situationism, Marxism, Structuralism and psychoanalysis in a radical praxis designed to subvert mainstream cinema and create an alternative non-bourgeois cinema. The two key fronts of the project were first, radical film journals and second, radical/experimental Agit-Prop film groups. The key journals were *Cahiers Du Cinema*, which in 1969 adopted an explicit Marxist editorial policy, and *Cinethique* which was founded in 1969 with the avowed intention of founding an Avant-Garde Marxist *materialist cinema*. 420 The most eminent film groups were the *Dziga-Vertov Group* formed by Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin and *SLON* which included Chris Marker. 421 Vital to the revolutionary intent of the alternative film makers was the commitment to eliminating the hierarchical work practices of the mainstream and replacing them with a democratic collective practice; the auteur was now deemed either a capitalist manager or a bourgeois phantom. The pivotal strategy of the post 1968 project was demystification, the development of a diverse set of critical techniques designed to reveal and negate the repressive bourgeois ideology of mainstream cinema. In cinematic practice this meant making films which subverted the ideological realm of the mainstream. In critical theory this meant promoting films which subverted the mainstream and/or interrogating mainstream films to reveal the mechanisms of bourgeois mystification. It is this praxis of demystification, translated from Paris by the auteur Structuralists and the L.F.M.C. Avant-Garde, that was to become the

419 Historical references here are taken from Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, BFI, London. 1978.

420 Sylvia Harvey, *Ibid.* 1978.(P.36-38).

421 The key journals were first *Cahiers Du Cinema*, which in 1969 adopted an explicit dialectical Marxist editorial policy, and second, *Cinethique* which was founded in 1969 with the avowed intention of eliminating mainstream spectacular cinema and replacing it with an Avant-Garde Marxist 'materialist cinema' which would free itself from the spectacular and mystic realm of ideology and become scientific; it would become Theoretical.

rationale of Anglo-American Theory , and the Theoretical authority of both British Avant-Garde film and Independent Film and counter-cinema. ⁴²² Although this rationale was to shift and develop from the late 1970s, under the impact of Feminism, Third Cinema, Post-Colonial politics, Queer politics etc. , there remained at the core of the project the assumption that demystification was the pivotal strategy in the development of a radical Independent film and video culture.⁴²³ Sylvia Harvey, the historian and Independent film activist, provides a concise articulation of this assumption in her classic study of film culture and May 1968:

It we want cultural production to operate in a different way and to a different sort of purpose, it is not enough simply to place it beneath the control of new masters, we need to understand it in its own way of working in order to change it. What is being proposed here is not the sudden creation of radically new communicative structures but the breaking down of existing popular forms which is made possible through an understanding of the weak points of these forms, an understanding of the points of internal contradiction and tension. When we begin to understand, for example , what a soap opera television serial , or a disaster movie, or a soft-porn sex film, seem to promise but never deliver-the values respectively of community, intense experience and pleasure- then we have discovered the point of entry into the form, the point of ideological tension, which will enable us to take it apart, to destroy it from within, and on this basis to construct new forms. ⁴²⁴

Harvey's quote raises the crucial reckoning for Theory as a politically radical or engaged discipline. According to the logic of demystification it must follow that the most mystified culture is the popular and the most mystified class is the working class. But, Theoretical demystification cannot be rationalised as a strategy which would directly free the proletariat from hegemony, since Theory was conceived in/ with generic characteristics which make it inaccessible and incomprehensible to all but the elite academically educated bourgeoisie. The only possible justification for Theoretical demystification as a radical ethic, is that it is

⁴²² Counter-Cinema was the term first devised by Peter Wollen in the early 1970s to describe Godard's oppositional film practice. It was subsequently taken up as a term and a model by various radical factions of the independent sector. See Peter Wollen, 'Godard and Counter Cinema : Vent d'Est' (1972) from Peter Wollen, *Readings and Writings*, Verso, London. 1982.(P.79-91).

⁴²³ This assumption had different functions and inflections for the diverse elements of the British Independent film and video sector ; the Agit-Prop collectives sought to subvert the mainstream with alternative ideology, Independent makers such as Wollen and Mulvey, John Davies and Pat Murphy or the Sankofa group foregrounded and exposed the construction of meaning in the mainstream text , the L.F.M.C. Avant-Garde sought to purge their films of every element, code and convention of mainstream cinema.

⁴²⁴ Sylvia Harvey, *Ibid.* 1978.

research aimed at an elite vanguard of academic filmmakers and cinema activists engaged in the development of an autonomous non-bourgeois film industry. It is Avant-Garde Theory ; armed with the research of Theory, an Avant-Garde film movement would be able to develop new demystified films and videos for the working class. But most of the Avant-Garde/ Independent Films and videos produced in the 1970s as an alternative to the mainstream were inscrutable to the mystified proletariat, in fact, since the only effective distribution for the Avant-Garde was higher education, the proletariat rarely saw them.⁴²⁵ In their vehement opposition to commodity capitalism and mainstream cinema, the activists of Independent cinema rejected box office success, popularity, entertainment and even pleasure. Instead they chose the Independence of State subsidy and the economy of Art. But as an Art object their ephemeral work was practically unsalable and the State had neither the motivation or the resources to develop an efficient alternative distribution/exhibition circuit. By the late 1970s it was clear that the revolution had been postponed, Avant-Garde/Independent film was not going to vanquish the mainstream, and consequently not going to valorise and vindicate the Theoretical project. Theory did not abandon demystification but it increasingly legitimised itself not as a revolutionary project, but as a highly successful and influential academic discipline. Moreover, as the Independent film and video project gave way to demands for inclusion into the mainstream the purpose of Theoretical demystification became increasingly cut off from Independent practice. The conceptual strategies developed by Cultural Studies in the late 1970s offered a way out of this impasse, for they extended the practice of demystification to the audience. In the Cultural Studies model the audience are not duped by the mainstream, they can resist or even construct their own subversive readings of the texts. Consequently, a radical alternative cinema was no longer necessary since Theoretical demystification was no longer the means, it became the end. Feminism, identity politics and the new pluralism of the 1980s exposed the patriarchal myth of a British monoculture but it also

fragmented the revolutionary aspiration of (Post)Structuralism and replaced it

⁴²⁵ Notable exceptions to this exclusivity were the Agit-Prop groups such as Cinema Action and Angry Arts/Liberation Films and the later community video movement of the early 1980s. However, since these groups were not Avant-Gardist and Theoretical demystification was not their core radical ethic, I would argue that the general point holds true.

with a reformist agenda of inclusion in the capitalist meritocracy. In the micro-histories and subcultures of Cultural Studies, Theory itself became just another subculture.

Although the historical development of Theory has been integral to the development of Independent film and video, it should not be assumed that the practice of Theory is film making ; the practice of Theory is literature. The separation between Theory and its practice cloaks the specificity of Theory as a genre of academic literature. As David Bordwell has observed, there is no convincing justification for the reduction of cinema to a language, nor for the consideration of films as *texts* to be *read*.⁴²⁶ The essential explanation of why Theorists adopted this analogy, and why it has proved so compelling is deceptively simple. Structuralism and Semiotics notwithstanding, Theorists adopted the analogy of literature for cinema because, as academic writers, it was their inveterate and professional medium and the official medium of the academy. The analogy of literature has produced intriguing Theoretical writing about the cinema but the discoveries of grammar, language, codes, syntax, signs etc. are the discoveries that literature is liable to discover in cinema, in the way that a musician would discover tempo, harmonics, themes, rhythm, polyphony etc. Which is to say that, if you develop a set of hermeneutic practices for the study of a distinct and primary cultural form, and you then engage these practices in the study of a distinctly different cultural form, you are liable to discover fascinating analogies. However, they will always be analogies. To discover how cinema works as cinema it is necessary to make films. The irony is that in attempting to escape from the *signifying practices of the bourgeois mainstream* certain Avant-Garde/Independent films, most significantly the Structural-Materialist work of the 1970s, became impenetrable to the language analogy and so revealed its limits. Moreover, since the pleasure of Theory, for Theorist and student alike, is to a great extent the startling demystification of the coded ideology and subtext within the text, such films were not attractive propositions for analysis, and so were passed over. Further, and more ironically, when Theory passed over the analysis

⁴²⁶ See David Bordwell, *Ibid*, 1996. (P.17-18).

of Avant-Garde/Independent film, it passed over the only sector of film production in which the film maker really was an auteur. ⁴²⁷

A Theoretical education did not teach students how to make popular films it taught them how to write literature about popular cinema. At its most *practical*, an understanding of Theory could perhaps enable a student to make experimental films encoded as *text* according to the language analogy. But since by the late 1970s a career as an experimental filmmaker meant consigning yourself to obscurity and penury, becoming a career Theorist in the security of the academy was a far safer option. Moreover, once Theory was established in the academy it did not need an alternative film and video industry since it could develop an autonomous industry based on education and publishing; a shadow industry which decoded and mapped popular culture but always remained outside its realm. The distance between Theory and its practice masks an appropriation by the academy ; if Theoretical demystification could not participate in the Avant-Garde transformation of cinema then it would aestheticise the cinema as literature.

As an industry, Theory is essentially a sector of Post-War education. The educational hierarchy of power and influence, descending from Oxbridge, down to the urban colleges of Further Education, and the most delinquent State comprehensives, is legitimised by the concept of the meritocracy. Students are tested and graded by meritocratic systems to select who will be granted professional qualifications, who will rise and pass to the higher levels of education or who will be legitimised as a specialist or expert in a given discipline. The meritocratic model replaces the hereditary hierarchy of feudalism with the concept of equality of opportunity in capitalism, it replaces divine inheritance with professional expertise and efficiency. As a political reality the meritocracy may seem immanent, or partial, but it is still only a model. The economic gap between the working class and the bourgeoisie has widened and polarised in the 21st century to an extent not recorded since the late 19th century. Academic success is effectively limited to the children of the bourgeoisie. Although a percentage of

⁴²⁷ For an examination of the problem of authorship in Avant-Garde film see Lauren Rabinowitz, *Ibid.* (1991). (P. 12- 36)

working class pupils do go on to higher education, the Universities and Art schools are effectively dominated by children from fee paying schools, grammar schools and comprehensives from prosperous middle class catchment areas. ⁴²⁸ As increasingly both higher education and technology based industries demand a high level of educational qualification, so the working classes are excluded from managerial and professional positions, and from the financial incomes that would give them class mobility. Moreover, even if the meritocracy were immanent or possible, it would not create an equitable and democratic society it would consolidate the rule of an elite class of professionals and specialists.

The meritocratic model is the ideological mechanism that allows the bourgeoisie to govern as an elite class in the name of liberty and equality. It is the power sharing compromise that was struck between the aristocracy and the ascendant bourgeoisie; the bourgeoisie in its desire to rule appropriated the culture of the aristocracy and allowed them to abide concealed in the mythical new bourgeois era. As a myth the meritocracy serves as the hope of progress, and as a political project it has the function of channelling radical or revolutionary subversion into reform.

The post 1968 radical film project rejected popular cinema as essentially bourgeois repression and then compounded this misreading by impetuously institutionalising itself into State education and State funded Art. Avant-Garde/Independent film and video production became dependent on meritocratic selection by State agencies and Theory became embedded in the meritocratic structures of the education industry. As revolt gave way to the reformist politics of the late 1970s so the radical agenda shifted from collective and alternative

⁴²⁸ ' In the FT's 1996 survey of A Level performance in England's 1,000 leading schools, all but 22 of the top 200 schools- educating around 150,000 children between them - were in the private sector. The FT's 1,000 top schools comprised most of the independent school sector but only a fraction of the State sector; yet within this selective group, including most of the remaining State grammar schools, the A Level performance was on average a quarter better than their State counterparts. Set alongside this the fact that two-thirds of private school pupils have parents in the AB professional and managerial classes, and the character of today's meritocracy is clear. And clearer still when we move on to the universities. Half of all the entrants to Oxford and Cambridge universities in 1995 came from the private schools, although the independent sector accounted for only 7 percent of the total school population.' Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard, *A Class Act, The Myth of Britain's Classless Society*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth (1997)(P.23-24)

practice to demands for equality of opportunity in the mythic meritocracy. Ultimately cultural Theory must be reckoned both by its actual achievements and by its avowed aspirations. If the crucial achievement of Theory has been to establish and legitimise the academic study of popular culture then for what purpose ? However distant and compromised, the assumption at the base of contemporary Theory is that the Theoretical project is an element of a broader Marxist/Socialist transformation of the film and video industry, from apparatus of bourgeois hegemony, to radical agent in the revolutionary class struggle. Whilst this aspiration was initiated in the revolutionary context of the Counterculture and student revolution of 1968 it has long since lost its radical agency. Theory has not transformed the film and video industry and the hope of an Independent industry is lost. Has Theory revealed the secret codes of the popular ? Perhaps the demystifying techniques of Theory could be vindicated if the results could be successfully deployed by the cultural industries, Theory would then be true in cultural practice. Semiotics could be applied to new methods of montage construction, or psychoanalysis could be used to position the audience into exciting new identities. But the industrial application of Theory in popular culture is negligible. The product of Theory is not popular : it is a bourgeois culture. Has Theory's penetration of the education industry produced a new generation of students immune to bourgeois hegemony or at least with enhanced powers of resistant reading ? Such a conclusion rests upon the assumption that popular culture is essentially bourgeois hegemony. But in the context of the historical suppression of the popular by the bourgeoisie and the nationalisation of Art as the legitimate culture of the State, it is not the popular which is essentially bourgeois, it is Theory.

Cultural Theory has become for the British State a crucial bureaucracy for the negotiation and maintenance of the border between Art and the popular. The function of Theory is to convert the incoherent, chaotic and vulgar collective popular into authorised, academic and legitimate culture. And this is not simply a textual strategy, it is an educational process since State education is the institution developed by the bourgeoisie to convert the illegitimate popular culture of

studious working class youth into Art. By which I mean that even if a small percentage of working class students are able to penetrate into the higher reaches of the academy they can only achieve this by alienating themselves from popular culture.

Chapter Twelve

The Constitution of the Independent Sector : a Trinity of Texts : Curtis, Gidal and Wollen.

In the formative years of the first British Underground there had been both the hope, and the potential of developing a genuinely anarchic and popular Underground distribution/exhibition network of clubs, Art Labs and Countercultural venues, perhaps comparable to the amateur cine clubs or the fringe theatre movement. But although there were later sporadic distribution/exhibition initiatives, such as the Other Cinema, no effective integrated and anarchic network was ever realised.⁴²⁹ In the case of the L.F.M.C. a key determinant of this limitation can be located as early as the accession of the Curtis/Le Grice production group over the Better Books faction. Whilst the Better Books faction numbered amongst its membership activists from various cultural, commercial and political backgrounds, the Curtis/Le Grice group were collectively committed both to autonomous Art and to the correlated Socialist rejection of commercial trade. This effectively meant that the new Avant-Garde movement was hostile to all commercial frameworks in which it could become financially self sufficient, and yet, as a culture of mechanical reproduction, neither could it produce the unique auratic objects required by the Art market. These factors interlocked to produce a praxis which defined itself as independent and oppositional to *mainstream* commercial film and television but which increasingly demanded the State subsidy and legitimacy accorded to other Art forms. Crucially and specifically, in the case of Avant-Garde film, the development of the dependency on State subsidy was absolute, since whilst other State funded Art forms had economies and institutions before the development of State Art funding, the post-war Avant-Garde developed as a State funded institution and it

⁴²⁹ The Other Cinema formed as a distribution group but began occasional public screenings around 1970 and continued to hold screenings and seasons at various London venues until 1976 when they were awarded a major grant by the B.F.I. to open a permanent cinema in the West End of London. However the project was fatally 'underfunded' and commercially misconceived and when the B.F.I. refused additional emergency funding the cinema closed in December 1977. See J.Clarke and R.Elliot, 'The Other Cinema: Screen Memory', *Wedge* No.2 1978.

has never, in any of its later incarnations, developed an economy or institution that was not legitimised and funded by the State.

Following the precedents of the Documentary Movement, Free Cinema and the B.F.I. Experimental Film Fund, the 1970s Avant-Garde and the subsequent Independent Film movement constituted themselves as State agencies with a national State funded infrastructure of production, distribution and exhibition. Indirect State funding and control developed as the assimilation of the Avant Garde/Independent sector into the legitimate and academic institutions of the State. Direct State funding and control developed through a web of interlocking initiatives :

- a. The development of production funding for individual makers and groups. The primary agencies were the Arts Council of England, the B.F.I. and the Regional Arts Boards. The key client groups were makers from the L.F.M.C., the I.F.A. , London Video Arts (L.V.A. later London Electronic Arts), students from the new Art school film and video courses and the regional film and video workshops movement. After 1982, Channel 4 became a key funder of Avant-Garde and Independent film and video in collaboration with both the Arts Council and the B.F.I.
- b. The development of funded distribution/exhibition initiatives such as the L.F.M.C , L.V.A. , the network of regional Independent film theatres, festivals, and national and international touring initiatives. A key distribution agency was the *Film and Video Umbrella* which was created by the Arts Council in 1983 specifically to distribute Avant-Garde work. In the 1980s both Channel 4 and later B.B.C 2 began to screen Avant-Garde and Independent work.
- c. Funding for key Avant-Garde/Independent agencies such the I.F.A., the L.F.M.C. and the workshop movement. And funding for the key journals and publications of the movement including B.F.I. book

publishing , and specialist magazines including *Afterimage* in the 1970s, *Undercut* and *Independent Media* in the 1980s, and *Vertigo* and *Coil* in the 1990s. Most recently, *Filmwaves*, which began as a truly independent, low and no budget film journal in 1997, has been literally colonised by Artists film and video in the form of a State funded supplement magazine *Art in Sight* introduced in 2001.

- d. The direct (inter)penetration of Theorists, makers and activists into the State agencies. Exemplary agents in this process would be the work of Curtis at the Arts Council, the appointment of Peter Sainsbury as head of production at the B.F.I. in 1973, and the appointment of I.F.A. delegates to the B.F.I. Production Board in the mid 1970s.

Together these initiatives formed a State industry for the production, distribution and exhibition of Avant-Garde/Independent film and video. The repressive agency of this industry must be understood first as the development of an elite and exclusive bourgeois moving image culture funded by State taxation levied on all classes of society, and second as a vertical industrial monopoly which effectively stifled and eclipsed the development of a truly anarchic radical, popular and experimental moving image culture. It could perhaps be argued that most Independent organisations were at least *semi-autonomous* , and many of the leading agents in the *sector* would deny any direct State control of their agency, or even assert that their work was actually subversive to the State, but such naivete is to misapprehend the complex historical development of Art as the legitimate culture of the bourgeois State.

Whilst, the Independent sector developed as a complex interaction between the major funding agencies there was also a fundamental binary division within the sector that functioned as a crucial mechanism of selection and exclusion. Although regional funding gradually increased from the 1980s, the two primary State funding agencies from the early 1970s until the creation of the unified Film Council in 2000, remained the Arts Council and the B.F.I. The B.F.I. Production

Board developed from the Experimental Film Fund of the 1950s. In the mid 1970s, under the direction of Peter Sainsbury, the Board effectively adopted a policy of exclusively funding Independent film against the mainstream, and this included a broad range of work from low budget *counter-cinema* feature films to Agit-Prop documentary and Avant-Garde work. However, by the late 1970s the Board had begun to revise this policy towards the predominate production of low budget, but commercially competitive, feature length narrative and documentary film. In the 1980s this tendency was consolidated under the direction of Colin McCabe and reinforced by a cluster of critically acclaimed features, crucially *The Draughtman's Contract* (Peter Greenaway 1982) and *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman (1986). This shift was in generic, institutional and commercial terms, a move away from the politics of Independence and towards the targeting of an educated bourgeoisie minority audience within mainstream feature film culture ; a British Art-cinema. Concurrent with this shift, B.F.I short film production was reconfigured as the provision of apprentice funding for first-time potential Art-cinema directors, and this was formalised in 1987 by the creation of the New Directors scheme. ⁴³⁰

Conversely, the Arts Council almost exclusively funded the Avant-Garde. ⁴³¹ Essentially, this meant that State funding provision was separated and limited to two broad, but clearly proscribed forms of bourgeois cinema: the Arts Council funded Art whilst the B.F.I. funded Art-cinema. The repression of the system functioned by exclusion and deflection ; projects deemed by the Arts Council to be mainstream, narrative or popular were rejected or advised to approach the B.F.I. or regional funders, projects deemed by the B.F.I. to be too experimental, abstract or non-commercial were rejected or advised to approach the Arts Council. Projects considered amateur were rejected by all agencies. The crucial exclusion

⁴³⁰ Throughout the 1990s the New Directors scheme annually selected around seven projects from the many hundreds of submissions : in 1993 there were 500 applications for funding, by 1998 this had risen to 1,772. Source : *B.F.I. Yearbook* 1987-1998.

⁴³¹ The B.F.I. New Directors scheme did fund a number of Avant-Garde makers, but according to Ben Gibson, the head of B.F.I. production in the 1990s, they were selected on the personal recommendation of David Curtis at the Arts Council. Consequently, there was no actual Avant-Garde access to the New Directors initiative except through the primary Avant-Garde funding agency.

(Gibson was speaking at a Study Day on Institutional Support for British Experimental Film and Video organised by the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection 13/12/02.

from this binary system was the anarchic, subversive and popular hybridisation of the Underground.

To illuminate the Theoretical and institutional development of the Avant-Garde and the broader Independent movement let's take as an exemplary and influential milestone the 1975 special issue of the prestigious contemporary Art magazine *Studio International* which was devoted to *The Avant-Garde Film in England and Europe*. Printed in this edition were three formative texts of the 1970s British Avant-Garde film movement. The first was David Curtis' *English Avant-Garde Film: An Early Chronology*, a personal history of the London Film-makers Co-Op, the second was *Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film*, Peter Gidal's first fully developed formulation of his Avant-Garde practice and the third was an article by the influential film Theorist and filmmaker Peter Wollen, *The Two Avant-Gardes*. This trinity of texts provided the '70s Avant Garde movement respectively with a history, a theory of practice and an historical agenda.

Curtis

A vital historical project of the Avant-Garde was to develop both an institutional/industrial base and a discourse of validity that would authenticate its aesthetic legitimacy and its claim to State funding ; this strategy was at times dynamic and explicit. Central to this project was the fabrication of a validating history structured around a canon of legitimate work and a pantheon of Artist makers.

Curtis' Chronology in *Studio International* is a personal and affectionate reminiscence of the early Underground and the transition to the Avant-Garde. The narrative is engaging and inclusive, however there is no reference to the early split within the L.F.M.C., or to any conflict or resistance to the Avant-Garde shift. Nevertheless, It ends with a brief survey of the recent advances in State funding and Art institutionalisation, which concludes with the speculation :

These latest moves confirm the avant-garde's complicity in its own institutionalisation, and a further stage in its integration into the English pattern of education and patronage in the arts. To what extent it can survive this orthodoxy, and preserve its radical position in relation to the (equally uncommercial) 'commercial cinema', is a question likely to be answered during the next ten years.⁴³²

What is remarkable about this foreboding is Curtis' apparent objectivity, since at the time of writing he was already a key agent in the very process he questions, and during the next 25 years he was to become the pivotal agent in the institutionalisation of the post-war British Avant-Garde.

Prior to his employment by the Arts Council as the Assistant Film Officer in 1977, Curtis was a dynamic activist in the formation of the L.F.M.C. , he wrote the classic history *Experimental Cinema* (1971) , and he also developed a career as an Avant-Garde curator organising a series of screenings and festivals at legitimate / Art institutes, principally the National Film Theatre. In 1973 he was first appointed a member of the Arts Council's production funding selection panel, the *Artists Film Sub-Committee* alongside Tony Rayns and Simon Field. Up until its dissolution in the late 1990s the Artists Film Sub-Committee, and after 1980, the *Artists Film and Video Sub-Committee* , was the most significant and consistent source of production funding for the Avant-Garde. The membership of the committee was constituted by inviting *Artists peers* and relevant experts to participate. In practice this meant that the committee was controlled by a shifting elite of L.F.M.C. activists and Avant-Garde makers and academics, including, at various times, Deke Dusinberre, Liz Rhodes, Al Rees, Guy Sherwin, Anne-Rees-Mogg, Mary Pat Leece, Tina Keane, Le Grice, Felicity Sparrow, Michael O' Pray, Alnoor Dewshi, Tony Warcus and others. The production grants awarded to individual makers by the sub-committee were minimal, although the net funding rose from around £12,000 in 1974, to around £50,000 in 1984 and over £100,000 in the 1990s. However, production finance was only an element of the cultural investment made by the Arts Council in individual makers, the net investment must be understood as both institutional and industrial. First the award of funding

⁴³² David Curtis, 'English Avant-Garde Film: An Early Chronology' in *Studio International* Nov./Dec. 1975 Vol. 190, No. 978 (P.182)

would mark and confirm the entry of the maker into the legitimate institution of Art. Second, the financial investment in a film and its maker could operate as a multiple investment across the whole range of funded institutions : a film would be first funded , then distributed by funded agencies, exhibited in funded institutions, written about in funded publications and the maker could then use their funded work to secure employment in the *Independent* sector. This integrated cultural and institutional validation was fundamental to the sector since its *Independence* was predicated on the radical negation of popularity and commercial success : the Independent sector had relatively no audience or income outside its own institutions.

In 1977, as a member of the Artists Film Sub-Committee, Curtis was one of the curators of a major Arts Council retrospective of Avant-Garde film at the Hayward Gallery on the Southbank : *Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film*. In the catalogue the purpose of the exhibition was made clear :

The purpose in showing the series of film programmes titled 'Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film' is to survey the films funded by the Arts Council through its Artists' Films Committee and to place them in an historical and critical context of avant-garde film practice. The contention is not that the film work funded by the committee is synonymous with the avant-garde in Britain today, but that most film-makers working in this area have been or are currently in receipt of financial support from the committee. 433

From this assertion it is possible to draw the conclusion that since the Arts Council funded *most* of the makers working in the area, so those who were not funded were not working in the area ; by extension this inference became a self validating formula which negated the work of all makers rejected by the committee. A year later the Hayward retrospective became a major international touring exhibition curated by Curtis and Deke Dusinberre : *A Perspective on English Avant-Garde Film*. The comprehensive catalogue for this tour included critical essays and statements from leading Avant-Garde film-makers and the first substantial essay in the

433 Arts Council of Great Britain catalogue, *Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film* , Hayward Gallery, 2 March- 24 April 1977.

catalogue was an updated version of Curtis' Chronology in which his speculation on the future institutionalisation of the Avant-Garde was omitted. 434

In 1979 Curtis was the Exhibition Officer for another Avant-Garde retrospective at the Hayward which explicitly foregrounded the British Structuralist aesthetic : *Film as Film*. The catalogue for this exhibition is a key document of the Structuralist Avant-Garde and the critical thrust of both the exhibition and the catalogue was to strategically revise the history of experimental film as a teleological progression towards abstract Structuralism. This was also the broad project of Malcolm Le Grice's influential book of 1977 *Abstract Film and Beyond*. 435 In his essay for the *Film As Film* catalogue, *The History We Need* , Le Grice addresses the role of history and theory in the development of the Avant-Garde and candidly recognises the purpose of Avant-Garde film history :

The underlying thesis of a historical construction not only affects the ordering of facts but also the articulation of what constitutes the facts themselves. In addition a historical formulation has a different function for the involved practitioner in a field than for the less involved 'general public'. For that nebulous 'general public' (in whose name so many decisions are made) a historical exhibition like 'Film as Film', as well as drawing attention to a particular field of past activity also validates those current practices which derive from them - providing them with historical credentials. In effect, whilst a current practice is evidently determined by its historical relationship, definition of a structure for this causality is a constructive production very much parallel to the practice itself. [...] 'The History We Need' implies a recognition that a neutral and inclusive history is broadly impossible and that the historical enterprise should be aimed at aiding the development of contemporary practice. 436

This is perhaps the clearest acknowledgement of the purpose and trajectory of Avant-Garde historification from a leading Avant-Garde activist. As the Avant-Garde institutionalised itself so it gained control of the means to make its own legitimate history. By careful selection and exclusion it developed an historical canon and a pantheon of elite makers. Moreover, the development of systematic

434 This was the version included in the major compendium of writing on the British Avant-Garde which was co-published by the Arts Council in 1996 : Michael O'Pray (ed.) , *The British Avant-Garde Film*, Arts Council /John Libbey, Luton. 1996.

435 Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, Studio Vista, London. 1977.

436 Malcolm Le Grice, 'The History We Need', from the catalogue for *Film As Film : the Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975*, Hayward Gallery 3 May-17 June 1979, Arts Council of Great Britain. (P.113)

selection and exclusion was not simply an ideological imperative, but an industrial necessity, since the institutional finance and employment for the Avant-Garde remained an elite, exclusive and limited resource.

In 1996 Curtis consolidated his twenty year Avant-Garde activism by editing *the Directory of British Film and Video Artists* published by the Arts Council.⁴³⁷ This book is in effect the published Avant-Garde pantheon and it resides in practically every Art School, University and College where experimental film and video is studied. Statistical analysis of the Directory reveals the complex interrelationships and correspondences of the pantheon. Exemplary instances are, that of the 118 makers almost 90% had been funded by the Arts Council, 73 % had been funded by the Arts Council at least twice, 21 % had served on Arts Council Committees and 38 % had been funded by the B.F.I. , Arts Council and Channel 4. Only 4 makers had received no funding prior to the Directory, and of these, 3 had work in the distribution catalogue of the Arts Council funded London Electronic Arts. More than half the makers had also taught at academic institutes. What must be remembered is that the makers in the directory represent only a small percentage of the film and video makers selected for production funding between 1973 and 1995. In turn these makers represent only a fraction of the rejected makers who applied for funding, and none of the many hundreds of amateur and Underground makers active in the period who did not apply for funding. In defence of the Avant-Garde it must be said that Curtis, Le Grice and other key activists did not believe that they were excluding thousands of Artists from the elite Avant-Garde movement. Because they did not believe that the makers they were excluding were Artists.

⁴³⁷ David Curtis (ed.), *Directory of British Film and Video Artists*, John Libbey/Arts Council, Luton. 1996..

The concept of Structuralist Avant-Garde film first appeared in an article by P. Adams Sitney in *Film Culture* in 1969.⁴³⁸ Sitney identified, theorised and promoted the Structuralist aesthetic in the work of a cluster of new American makers : Tony Conrad, George Landow, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Joyce Wieland, Ernie Gehr and Paul Sharits. According to Sitney the Structural tendency marked a crucial shift in the American Avant-Garde away from complex visual lyricism, mythopoeia and abstract animation, and towards a minimalist intellectual aesthetic in which form and process become content; in which the content of the film is subsidiary to the structure. He traced the origins of Structural film to the work of Andy Warhol and the Austrian maker Peter Kubelka and he identified four key characteristics of the aesthetic : a fixed/ static frame, flicker (strobe) effects, loop printing, and rephotography. But the aesthetic crux of Structuralism, Sitney asserted, was the elongation/ extension of cinematic experiment into an investigation/ defamiliarization of perception and cognition.

Parallel to the development of American Structuralism the L.F.M.C. Avant-Garde also developed a contiguous formal aesthetic led by the work of Legrice and the young American, Peter Gidal.

Gidal was born in America and studied theatre in Massachusetts and Munich. In 1968 at the age of 22 he moved to London to study film at the Royal College of Art and almost immediately became involved with the early L.F.M.C.⁴³⁹ From his involvement with the Co-Op he became a leading activist and maker in the British Avant-Garde : his films were widely screened both nationally and internationally, he programmed the Co-Op cinema 1971-1974, he organised screenings of Avant-Garde film at the N.F.T., he wrote regular reviews of Avant-Garde film for *Time*

⁴³⁸ Sitney's definition and history of Structural Film was however contested by the film maker Peter Kubelka and the Fluxus ideologue George Maciunas. See P.Adams Sitney, 'Structural Film', *Film Culture*, No.47, 1969. ; revised, Winter, 1969 and compiled in P.Adams Sitney (ed.) *Film Culture, An Anthology*. Secker and Warburg, London.1971.(P.326-349). See P.Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: the American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, (2nd.Edition) , Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1979.(P.369-446).

⁴³⁹ See Peter Gidal, 'Flashbacks: Peter Gidal', *Filmwaves* No. 7. Spring 1999.

Out magazine 1972-1975, he was on the original organising committee of the I.F.A. in 1974 and he taught film making at the Royal College of Art from 1973 - 1983. ⁴⁴⁰ Most importantly in this context, he was, in collaboration with Le Grice, the primary theorist of the L.F.M.C. Avant-Garde ; Gidal developed an Avant-Garde aesthetic that inspired a generation of Avant-Garde makers and many critical assumptions of contemporary Artists Film and Video are still underpinned by his theoretical framework.

Gidal's *Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film* (1975) was essentially the answer to a question he had asked five years earlier in the Underground film magazine *Cinemantics*. ⁴⁴¹ In that early article *Film As Materialist Consumer Product* (1970), Gidal ponders how to develop a form of radical Avant-Garde Art (cinema) which would have the power to induce a revolutionary consciousness in the viewer. His eventual theorisation of Structural/Materialist (S/M) film is an attempt to reconcile the work produced by the L.F.M.C. Avant-Garde with his radical aspirations, Sitney's Structuralist film aesthetic and elements of the continental Marxist/(Post) Structuralist philosophy also deployed in British Theory.

In his enmity to popular cinema Gidal goes far beyond all other previous cinematic Avant-Gardes, and his contemporaries in auteur Structuralism and Cultural Studies. For Theory the hegemonic mainstream is ironically always the subject of investigation, the code to be broken, the beloved other. But for Gidal the popular is an irredeemable repressive agent which must be totally obliterated. He conceives the key repressive devices of popular film as illusion, narrative and identification ; the antidote to this repression is advanced S/M film. If the demystification of Theory presumes to reveal the hidden hegemony of the popular, S/M film proposes to confront the viewer with the materiality of film purged of all hegemonic codes and devices:

Structural/Materialist film attempts to be non-illusionist. The process of the film's making deals with devices that result in demystification or the

⁴⁴⁰ Mark Webber, *Ibid.* 2002..

⁴⁴¹ Peter Gidal, 'Film As Materialist Consumer Product', *Cinemantics* No.2, 1970.

attempted demystification of the film process. But by 'deals with' I do not mean 'represents'. In other words, such films do not document various film procedures, which would place them in the same category as films which transparently document a narrative, a set of actions, etc. Documentation, through usage of the film medium as transparent, invisible, is exactly the same when the object being documented is some 'real event', some 'film procedural event', some 'story', etc. An avant-garde film defined by its development towards increased materialism and materialist function does not represent, or document anything. The film produces certain relations between segments, between what the camera is aimed at and the way the image is 'presented'. The dialectic of the film is established in that space of tension between materialist flatness, grain, light, movement, and the supposed real reality that is represented. Thus a consequent attempted destruction of the illusion is a constant necessity. 442

The imperative of S/M film is to eliminate all bourgeois ideology, all seductive illusion, all identification, narrative, temporal deception, imagism, idealism, all naturalised and obvious meaning and dangerous mystification. Free from the web of illusion, S/M film is a record of its own production, a generative system that creates a radical dialectic between viewer and film ; it confronts the viewer with the material production of consciousness.

Attempted in structural / materialist film is a non-hierarchical, cool, separate unfolding of a perceptual activity. [...] Through the attempted non-hierarchical, cool, separate unfolding a distance(ing) is sought. This distance reinforces (rather than denying) the dialectic interaction of viewer with each film moment , necessary if it is not to pass into passiveness and needlessness. 443

Ultimately Structural / Materialism is the final demystification, it is the stripping away of all illusion and ideology to reveal the materiality of film ; it is a Theoretical practice :

The structural / materialist film and production of meaning in film, is the production of film itself, in its (thought or 'unthought') theoreticalness, and (thought or 'unthought') ideological intervention. To crucially intervene in film practice, the unthought must be brought to knowledge, thought. The set of relations between film practice and film as theory, can then be brought forth to operate in clarity. 444

Implicit throughout is the assumption that S/M film is a necessary element of an advanced revolutionary Marxist struggle, but the question that Gidal neglects is

442 Peter Gidal, 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film', *Studio International* Nov./Dec. 1975 Vol. 190, No. 978 (P.189)

443 Peter Gidal, *Ibid.* 1975 (P.192)

444 Peter Gidal, *Ibid.* 1975 (P.194)

just how S/M film will function in this struggle : who is to be demystified ?

After Studio International 1975, Gidal continued to refine and expand his theoretic and produced a series of influential articles and collections culminating in the book *Materialist Film* (1989).⁴⁴⁵ His film work also expanded in duration and ambition but still remained committed to materialising the S/M aesthetic.

However, the theory of S/M was contested from almost the moment of its formulation. In a special independent cinema edition of *Afterimage* in the summer of 1976 Anne Cottringer opened a (Post)Structuralist critique of Gidal's essay, a year later Constance Penley launched a controversial feminist/psychoanalytic attack on S/M and a series of evaluations and disputes followed into the 1980s.⁴⁴⁶ But the most damaging, incisive critique appeared alongside Cottringer's article in *Afterimage* in 1976 : *Experimental/Avant-Garde/Revolutionary Film Practice* by Mike Dunford.

Dunford's concise critique is a direct and polemical Marxist/Leninist attack on the theory and practice of S/M film, the radical aspirations of the Avant-Garde and the constitution of the L.F.M.C. It is all the more damning since it is the renunciation of a leading maker of the S/M Avant-Garde. The key point of Dunford's attack is that S/M theory was not based on an objective analysis of its own social/historical and material conditions and its role in the production of bourgeois ideology. Instead it developed a theory derived from and validating its Art practice.

It has evolved a particular form of practice stemming from the material nature of the medium, and from a rejection and exposure of the practices, codes and forms of naturalistic industrial/commercial film practice. The theory of this work has been a form of technical theory, deriving from the methodology of its practice, and that of other practices within the fine-arts, and it is therefore unconscious of its aim within ideology.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁵ Peter Gidal, *Materialist Film*, Routledge, London. 1989..

⁴⁴⁶ Anne Cottringer, 'On Peter Gidal's Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film', *Afterimage*, No. 6. Summer 1976. also Constance Penley, 'The Avant-Garde and its Imaginary', *Camera Obscura*, No.2 Fall 1977.

⁴⁴⁷ Mike Dunford, 'Experimental/Avant-Garde/Revolutionary Film Practice', *Afterimage*, No. 6. Summer 1976. (P.107).

Although he doesn't refer to it as Underground Cinema, Dunford recognises that the Countercultural phase of experimental film in the 1960s was a radical democratic/anarchic project that was finally repressed by Avant-Garde Art. The shift in the L.F.M.C. from the Counterculture to the aesthetics of Structuralism was a shift towards a professionalised Art (handicraft) practice that fetishised the production process : printing, processing, editing, rephotography, projection etc. This aesthetic fetishisation was theorised/valorised as Materialism. But whilst the L.F.M.C. theorised against the bourgeois hegemony of the mainstream they were actually developing the Avant-Garde as an elite and autonomous institution under the direct control of the bourgeois State.

A theory is much more than a simple rationalisation of procedure and process, but, denied access to any understanding of the ideological role that experimental film plays as part of the avant-garde , and participating so closely in the reproduction of that ideological function, the theories of experimental film practice have been unable , and will be continuously unable to do more than be an apologetics, and the more invested and committed the film-makers become, the more implicated in the reproduction of that ideology, the more they will be unable to perceive their position within it. 448

Dunford asserts that far from negating or transcending the mainstream, the Avant-Garde locked itself into an antithetical dependency on the mainstream which obscured its actual ideological function ; the conflict between the mainstream and the Avant-Garde is no more than a disagreement between bourgeois experts. Moreover, the anti-illusionism of the Avant-Garde is no more free from ideology than the illusionism of the mainstream, since they both serve to hide the social/historical and material conditions of their production. Finally, Dunford insists that experimental film is still a potentially radical project but that this potential will never be realised in Art.

Dunford's renunciation is convincing within the bounds of its context, however his revision still falls within the broad assumptions of film/ cultural Theory : he still believes that demystification should be the primary technique for a radical film practice and he still conceives the popular as a mainstream of bourgeois hegemony. To gain a complete historical overview of Gidal's theory of S/M film it

448 Mike Dunford, *Ibid.* 1976. (P.106).

is necessary to revise Dunford's renunciation in the context of the historical conflict between Art and the popular.

The Structural shift at the Co-Op was the aggregate of a cluster of determining factors which included : a change in membership and ideology towards Art, Artists and Art students, the increasing access and ownership of artisanal production equipment and an aesthetic minimalism reinforced by relative poverty and isolation in an autonomous institute. The opposition to popular cinema was not based on analysis or engagement, the Avant-Garde simply assumed that the *mainstream* was repressive. ⁴⁴⁹ Gidal's anti-illusionism was not conceived against the truly popular diversity of the marvellous narrative of attractions, it was conceived against an untheorised and mostly imaginary mainstream cinema of bourgeois Naturalism. Reinforcing their hostility to the mainstream, the S/M Avant-Garde had no training, experience or interest in the basic techniques of popular cinema : narrative construction, working with actors, continuity editing etc. Combined, all these factors drove the Co-Op makers towards abstract Structuralism. Nevertheless, it must be also be understood that within the historical trajectory of the autonomisation and nationalisation of British Art, and within that sector of this process which is the development of a film Art, Gidal's theory of S/M is the definitive theorisation for the Modernist autonomisation of the content of film. S/M eliminates all trace of the vulgar popular from film and renders its meaning superfluous. Far from being an antidote to bourgeois hegemony, S/M is the method that would finally sedate and gentrify cinema. The idea that working class audiences or even non-Avant-Garde film makers would be demystified by Structural/Materialist film is clearly absurd. After the populism of the Underground, the shift to Structural film in both Europe and America effectively reduced the audience for experimental film to an institutional bourgeois elite. Moreover, the shift to the aesthetics of Art reinforced by the devout and ascetic dogma of Structuralism effectively purged the convivial and

⁴⁴⁹ In the case of Gidal this assumption was almost pathological, since he considers himself to be specifically vulnerable to the seductive narcotic of narrative. See for instance comments in Peter Gidal, 'Flashbacks: Peter Gidal', *Filmwaves* No. 7. Spring 1999. (P.20) Also comments made by Gidal about being "hooked" on narrative at the panel discussion of *Shoot Shoot Shoot : The First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-Operative and British Avant-Garde Film 1966-76 Sat 4 May 2002*.

interactive popular from the auditorium. In the cool detached unfolding of Structural/Materialist film the elite audience experienced the dialectic of their own perception, the distance from themselves to the work of Art : *aura*.

Gidal's films over the next twenty eight years more or less succeeded to materialise his increasingly mystic theories. Against the spectacular illusion of the mainstream and the seductive pleasure of entertainment he produced a series of Arts Council funded films that must be amongst the most radically tedious work ever produced. ⁴⁵⁰

As the 1970s progressed the Structuralist aesthetic at the L.F.M.C was gradually fragmented and the Avant-Garde began to develop new genres and projects ; the *Landscape* films of the late 1970s, feminist initiatives, *the New Romanticism* and *New Pluralism* of the 1980s, video Art, digital Art etc. Moreover, as the Avant-Garde established new agencies and expanded into the national network of academic institutions so there was also a relative decentralisation of the Avant-Garde project from London. Nevertheless, the fundamental aesthetisation and institutionalisation of the Avant-Garde had been effected through the theory and practice of Structural/Materialism and this conceptual substructure was incorporated and maintained by Gidal, Le Grice and their collaborators from their respective academic bases ; Gidal at the R.C.A. and Le Grice at St Martins etc. ⁴⁵¹ This institutional hegemony was reinforced by the development of the vertical monopoly of the Independent (State funded) sector. Consequently, the successive movements and projects which emerged after the 1970s may have diverged from the Avant-Garde Structuralist aesthetic or even subverted the aesthetic, but this subversion always remained an Oedipal bid for power within the Avant-Garde

and never challenged the aesthetic legitimacy of film and video Art or the

⁴⁵⁰ Of Gidal's eleven major films between 1974 - 1996, at least seven were funded by the Arts Council. See David Curtis (ed.), *Directory of British Film and Video Artists*, John Libbey/Arts Council, Luton. 1996.. From personal experience I have seen Gidal's forty minute film *Guilt* (1988) vanquish a committed audience in about fifteen minutes. Of the three people who remained to the end of the film, one eventually began to cast hand shadow puppets on the screen, whilst the other two giggled. This was at a public screening at the I.C.A. Biennial of Independent Film and Video 1989 (Oct.1989).

⁴⁵¹ Students taught by either Le Grice or Gidal would include Cerith Wyn Evans, Steve Chivers, John Smith, Michael Maziere, Lucy Panteli, Nino Danino, Sandra Lahire, Kobena Mercer, Isaac Julien etc.

supposed autonomy of the Independent sector. To actually develop work which subverted Art and the State control of the Independent sector would mean to deny and exclude yourself from the vertical monopoly of the Independent sector and to work underground. In this way Film and Video Art eventually developed an elegant and highly effective strategy to defend its legitimacy.

Wollen

Peter Wollen emerged as the preeminent auteur Structuralist of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He was educated at Oxford and subsequently wrote for *New Left Review*, worked in the Education Department of the B.F.I. and was a key contributor to the relaunched journal *Screen* in 1969. That same year the B.F.I. published his seminal book : *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Over the next 30 years he became one of the leading film Theorists and academics in both Britain and America. But Wollen was not only a Theorist, he was also a pivotal maker of the Independent movement. Working in the 1970s and early 1980s with his wife, and fellow ex-Oxford Theorist, Laura Mulvey, Wollen also co-wrote and directed a controversial series of State funded, feature length films. ⁴⁵²

Of the three articles which appeared in *Studio international* in 1975, Peter Wollen's *The Two Avant-Gardes* is the text that has become the most established, respected and readily available, in fact it has become perhaps the most ubiquitous and influential text in the history of Anglo-American experimental film/ video. Its trajectory winds through the work of the leading theorists of the Avant-Garde over three decades. It has been interpreted by Deke Dusinberre, Anne Cottringer , Laura Mulvey , Philip Drummond , Sylvia Harvey , Paul Willemen , J. Hoberman,

⁴⁵² Wollen and Mulvey's feature films included *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Funded: Arts Council 1977), *Crystal Gazing* (Funded : B.F.I./Channel Four 1981) and *The Bad Sister* (Funded: Channel Four 1983). In 1975 Wollen co-wrote the script for *The Passenger* (Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni. Writ. Wollen/Peploe/Antonioni). And in 1987 he wrote and directed the feature *Friendship's Death* (Funded : B.F.I. 1987).

Anne Friedberg and Juan A. Suárez amongst others.⁴⁵³ It has provided the basis for debate in numerous journals and it has appeared in numerous critical anthologies and bibliographies.⁴⁵⁴ And it is still used as a key document in Art schools, colleges, universities and academic institutions where film and video is studied.⁴⁵⁵

The attraction of Wollen's article as an educational tool is that:

- a. It can be photocopied on five easily assembled A4 pages.
- b. Its brevity makes it easy to read, explain and discuss in a class.
- c. It is both a condensed history, a typology and a theoretical model; it is a beginner's guide and a means to generate discussion.

For many film/media students *The Two Avant-Gardes* maybe the only Theoretical work on the Avant-Garde they ever read or at least the only work they remember. Although it was written during the heroic phase of the Avant-Garde/Independent sector (1971-1980), and in spite of shifts in theory/practice,

⁴⁵³ The references are respectively : Deke Dusinberre , 'St. George in the Forest: the English Avant-Garde' from *Afterimage*, No.6 1976. (P.4-20), Anne Cottringer, 'On Peter Gidal's Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film' from *Afterimage* No.6 1976.(P.86-96), Laura Mulvey, 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde', from *Visual and Other Pleasures*,The Macmillan Press Ltd., London 1989, (P.111-127) Philip Drummond, 'Notions of Avant-Garde Cinema' from *Film as Film*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1979.(P.9-16), Sylvia Harvey, *Independent Cinema ?*, West Midlands Arts, Stratford, 1978., Paul Willemen, 'An Avant-Garde for the 1980s' from *Framework* 24 1984.(P.53-74), J. Hoberman, 'After Avant-Garde Film', from *Art After Modernism*, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984.(P.59-73) , Anne Friedberg *Window Shopping*, University of California Press, 1993 (P. 157-177) and Juan A.Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens and Superstars*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996.(P.XXII-XXVIII).

⁴⁵⁴ Most recently all three *Studio International* texts were anthologised in O'Pray, Michael (ed.) *Avant-Garde Film* , University of Luton Press, 1997. Significantly *The Two Avant-Gardes* was substantially reproduced by Julian Petley in his introduction to the 'Avant -Garde(s)' section of the BFI Distribution Library Catalogue 1978.

⁴⁵⁵ In *The Cinema Book* (2nd edition 1999), the British Film Institute's ' *definitive introduction to Film Studies for students of all levels.*' Alison Butler uses *The Two Avant-Gardes* to map out the history of Avant Garde film . Alison Butler, *Avant-Garde and Counter Cinema* in Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink (eds),*The Cinema Book* 2nd Edition , BFI Publishing, London. 1999.(P.114-119).

Wollen's article is still widely held to be relevant. ⁴⁵⁶ Al Rees in his *History of Experimental Film and Video* (1999), refers to the article and claims that:

...the dilemmas Wollen adduces still remain, adapted to new social pressures. ⁴⁵⁷

In the *The Two Avant Gardes* Wollen employs concepts and terms from structural linguistics and Althusserian Marxism to construct a binary dialectic between two European Avant-Gardes ; first the Co-Op movement (the L.F.M.C. and related groups in Austria, Holland and Germany), and second, the work of continental directors exemplified by Jean Luc-Godard and Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet, what can be termed, the Straub/Godard Avant-Garde. ⁴⁵⁸ At the extreme, each faction would exclude the other from theoretical and radical legitimacy : they each claim to be real vanguard. ⁴⁵⁹

Next, Wollen compares the split in the 1975 Avant-Garde with a split in the European Avant-Garde of the 1920s ; between the movement which sought to extend the scope of painting into cinema (the French Avant-Garde, Eggeling, Richter, Man Ray etc.) and the Soviet Avant-Garde (Eisenstein, Dovzhenko and Vertov) which developed from theatre and poetry. Wollen aligns the *painters group* with the Co-Op movement, and the Soviet Avant-Garde with the

⁴⁵⁶ I date this period from the London Film-Makers move to its first autonomous premises at Prince of Wales Crescent (1971), to the establishment of the Association of Cinematographic, Television and allied Technicians (A.C.T.T.) Committee for Independent Grant Aided Film (1980). For an overview of this period see 'The Post-War Independent Cinema- Structure and Organisation' by Simon Blanchard and Sylvia Harvey in *British Cinema History*, J.Curran and V.Porter (eds.) Weidenfield and Nicholson, London, 1983.

⁴⁵⁷ Al Rees, *Ibid.*(1999) (P.93).

⁴⁵⁸ 'Film history has developed unevenly, so that in Europe today there are two distinct avant-gardes. The first can be identified loosely with the Co-op movement and includes most of the film-makers written about in this number of *Studio International*. The second would include film-makers such as Godard, Straub and Huillet, Hanoun, Jancso. Naturally there are points of contact between these two groups and common characteristics, but they also differ quite sharply in many respects : aesthetic assumptions, institutional framework, type of financial support, type of critical backing, historical and cultural origin.' Peter Wollen, *The Two Avant-Gardes*, *Studio International* Nov./Dec. 1975 Vol. 190, No. 978 (P.171). When it was republished in Wollen's own anthology *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies* 1982. the line: '.....and includes most of the film-makers written about in this number of *Studio International*.' was omitted from the text. This republished version, by virtue of its wide availability rapidly replaced the *Studio International* version, and so isolated the text from its original intertextual context. Peter Wollen, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies*, Verso, London 1982. (P.77).

⁴⁵⁹ America is effectively relegated from the dialectic since, because although it is the hub of the Co-op movement, it has no equivalent to the Straub/Godard Avant-Garde.

Straub/Godard faction. However by the end of the article this *comparison* has become a single historic division of two separate developing traditions: it is the split of the 1920s which caused the split in 1975. The origin of the split can be located at the Modernist breakthrough in painting, the advent of Cubism, which had a radical effect on all the *arts*.

The innovations of Picasso and Braque, were seen as having an implication beyond the history of painting itself. They were intuitively felt, I think, very early on, to represent a critical semiotic shift, a changed concept and practice of sign and signification, which we now can see to have been the opening-up of a space, a disjunction between signifier and signified and a change of emphasis from the problem of signified and reference, the classic problem of realism, to that of signifier and signified within the sign itself. When we look at the development of painting after the cubist breakthrough, however, we see a constant trend towards an apparently even more radical development: the suppression of the signified altogether, an art of pure signifiers detached from meaning as much as reference.... 460

The abstract trend of the *suppression of the signified* in painting produced the Avant-Garde tradition that culminated in the Co-Op movement . 461 Whilst the earlier *disjunction between signifier and signified* produced the Straub/Godard Avant-Garde by way of literature and theatre.

The key figure in the Straub/Godard Avant-Garde is Godard :

In a sense , Godard's work goes back to the original breaking point at which the modern avant-garde began- neither realist or expressionist, on the one hand, nor abstractionist, on the other. 462

Whilst Wollen's model is provisional and paradoxical, and whilst he allows for exceptions to the binary classification , the oppositions and membership of the groups can be systematically laid out:

460 Peter Wollen, *Ibid.* 1975. (P.172).

461 'One powerful influence has come from painting , bringing with it a tendency to abstraction-pure light or colour; and non figurative design-or deformation of conventional photographic imagery, involving prismatic fragmentation and splintering, the use of filters or stippled glass, mirror shots, extreme and microscopic close ups, bizarre angles, negative images etc. all of these are to be found in 1920s films.' Peter Wollen, *Ibid.* 1975. (P.172).

462 Peter Wollen, *Ibid.* 1975. (P.174).

The Co-Op Avant-Garde

Painters.

Sound

FORM.

Pure signifiers.

Abstraction.

non-narrative

anti-illusionist

Film as material.

Self-reflexive.

Visual.

Silence or music.

Film-makers.

Artisanal.

Performers.

'Reconciled' to minority
audience.

Implicitly political.

1920s film-makers

Leger - Murphy

Picabia-Clair

Straub/Godard Avant-Garde

Dramatists/Writers.

Poetry.

VS. CONTENT.

The signified.

Realist.

Narrative.

Naturalism.

Cinema as expression.

Intertextual.

Verbal.

Words and stories.

Directors.

Commercial.

Film stars.

'Uneasy' about minority
audience / aimed at mass audience.

Consciously political.

Political subject matter.

Eisenstein

Dovzhenko

Eggeling

Vertov

Richter

Man Ray

Moholy-Nagy

Van Doesburg

Lizitzky

Duchamp

1975 film-makers

David Curtis

Godard

Malcolm Le Grice

Straub and Huillet

Peter Gidal

Hanoun

Steve Dwoskin

Jancso

Kurt Kren

Godard and Gorin-

Annabel Nicholson

Dziga Vertov Group

Birgit Hein etc.

But Wollen's text is not a simple binary dialectic, it is on close analysis the invocation of two separate historical traditions which have developed different practices in different historical phases but always within a dialectic determined by the Modernist (semiotic) shift of Cubism. It is a teleological history, it is an *Avant-Garde* history. And the assumption of progress ascendant can be discerned in certain key phrases used in the article. The model is fixed with the opening line :

Film history has developed unevenly..... 463

From this it must be assumed that film history could, or rather should develop *evenly*. What would an *even* film history be like ? At the end of the article Wollen tentatively suggests:

....in a way, the cinema offers more opportunities than any other art - the cross fertilisation which was so striking a feature of those early decades, the

463 Peter Wollen, *Ibid* 1975. (P.171).

reciprocal interlocking and input between painting, writing, music, theatre, etc. could take place within the field of cinema itself. This is not a plea for a great harmony, a synaesthetic *gesamtkunstwerk* in the Wagnerian sense. But cinema, because it is a multiple system, could develop and elaborate the semiotic shifts which marked the origins of the avant-garde in a uniquely complex way, a dialectical montage within and between a complex of codes. At least writing now as a film-maker, that is the fantasy I like to entertain.

464

Despite his doubts and protestations to the contrary, the convergence of the two Avant-Gardes is exactly what Wollen desires and believes is necessary. This is the synthesis of the two Avant-Gardes dialectic, a single Modernist Avant-Garde which would combine the formal experiments (painting) of the Co-Op Movement with the semiotic strategies and political radicalism (literature/drama) of the Straub/Godard Avant-Garde. This would be the *evening* of film history as the two parallel Avant-Gardes meet at the cusp of the present to form a dialectical cutting edge. Wollen's language of ascendant progress suggests that this convergence is possible and even immanent, but it has been delayed :

During the first decade of this century, when the historic avant-garde embarked on its own path, the years of the *coupure*, the cinema was still in its infancy, scarcely out of the fairground and the nickelodeon, certainly not yet the Seventh Art. for this reason- and for others, including economic reasons- the avant-garde made itself felt late in the cinema and it is still very marginal, in comparison with painting or music or even writing. 465

But this *lateness* and the vaguely mentioned *economic reasons* are not the principal reasons for the marginality of the Avant-Garde. It is implicit in Wollen's model that the progress of the Avant-Garde has been blocked by the historical split, the distinct traditions are polarised around mutually exclusive practices and ideologies. The Co-Op Movement has become increasingly entrenched in positions of extreme, essential and pure visuality, abstraction and anti-illusionism, whilst the Straub/Godard Avant-Garde has lost the radical collective and experimental dynamism of May 1968. The dialectic of the two Avant-Gardes condemns both to isolation, only a synthesis can revitalise the Avant-Garde

464 Peter Wollen, *Ibid* 1975. (P.175).

465 Peter Wollen, *Ibid* 1975. (P.175).

project. Writing in 1975 Wollen believed there was going to be a synthesis, and as a filmmaker and a radical theorist his work could help bring this about. ⁴⁶⁶

Wollen's dialectic is informed by debates surrounding the mutual hostility between two factions of the Avant-Garde and his purpose is to bring coherence to this conflict and to reconcile these factions in theory and practice. But, his brief exposition does not reveal the political/industrial context of the divided Avant-Garde. Moreover, notwithstanding the international scope of Wollen's model, its real significance must be understood in the context of the development of British Independent cinema.

The post-war dispute concerning the true path of the Avant-Garde can be traced back to a critical interchange in the mid 1950s between Hans Richter in *Film Culture* (New York) and André Bazin in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Paris) ; Richter advocated non-representational film Art and Bazin proposed a new Avant-Garde working within the popular cinema industry. ⁴⁶⁷ The advent of the French New Wave, the New American Cinema and Underground Cinema problematised and suspended these contesting theoretical claims. However, after the utopian passion of May 1968 the dispute was again polarised into a division between the Marxist adherents of *Cahiers*, *Cinethique* and the Agit-Prop collectives and the theorists/makers of the nascent Structural Avant-Garde. In Britain a crucial and exemplary confrontation between the factions was the publication of the first *Afterimage* special issue on the Avant-Garde in 1970. ⁴⁶⁸ The issue opens with a scathing editorial by Peter Sainsbury in which he accuses the American Underground of bourgeois mysticism and potential fascism. This invective is later followed by a more measured, but equally caustic article, *Which Avant-Garde* by Graeme Farnell , that indicts not only the American Underground, but also Gidal and the British movement, as hopelessly bourgeois, compromised and

⁴⁶⁶ Reading Wollen's 1993 essay 'The Last New Wave' he seems to suggest that the synthesis of the two Avant-Gardes was finally accomplished in the films of Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway. Peter Wollen, 'The Last New Wave' in O'Pray, Michael (ed.) *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926-1995* , University of Luton Press. 1995.(P.239-256).

⁴⁶⁷ See Annette Michelson in the Introduction to Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, Secker and Warburg, London 1969.(P.V-VI)

⁴⁶⁸ *Afterimage* No.2 Autumn 1970.

reactionary. After a series of quotes from the Dziga Vertov Group, Cinethique and allied radicals, Farnell invokes the creation of a new scientific Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialist Avant-Garde. ⁴⁶⁹ Significantly, it is this same issue of *Afterimage* that decisively drops the term/ model of Underground Cinema and adopts the logic of the Avant-Garde ; by which I mean to suggest that this contest for the vanguard of radical Art necessitated and reinforced the shift to the Avant-Garde. Farnell's article can in part be read as a response to Gidal's early Structural theorisations and attacks on Godard in *Cinemantics* that same year. ⁴⁷⁰ Whilst Gidal's eventual theorisation of S/M film can be read as a refutation of the *Afterimage* critique of 1970. Both the S/M Avant-Garde and the disciples of Godard claimed to be developing the true Marxist dialectical materialist cinema.

In 1975 the British *Straub/Godard* tendency effectively consisted of a coalition of radical Independent film Theorists, makers and activists which included the core faction of the I.F.A., Wollen, Mulvey and other *Screen* Theorists, the key Agit-Prop collectives, and the Other Cinema distribution group. This coalition can be broadly identified as the Counter-Cinema tendency. In institutional/industrial terms the historical context of Wollen's conceptual split was the development of two competing industrial sectors within the Independent movement. The L.F.M.C. (Co-Op movement) was developing a power base at the Arts Council and an infrastructure within Art education. Meanwhile, the makers and Theorists of the Counter-Cinema tendency were developing an institutional base at the B.F.I. which was both practical and Theoretical : Peter Sainsbury had been appointed head of B.F.I. production and *Screen* and the B.F.I. Education Department effectively functioned as the demystifying Theoretical wing of Counter-Cinema.

Wollen's attempt to reconcile the conflicting factions of the Avant-Garde is essentially Theoretical, it is the substitution of a complex social/industrial/political separation with a semiotic/textual separation : it is an attempt to transpose practice into Theory. The power and charm of the Two Avant-Gardes is first, its

⁴⁶⁹ Graeme Farnell, 'Which Avant-Garde ?' , *Afterimage* No.2 Autumn 1970.(P.65-71)

⁴⁷⁰ See Peter Gidal, 'Film As Materialist Consumer Product', *Cinemantics* No.2, 1970. Also Peter Gidal, 'Film As Materialist Consumer Product II', *Cinemantics* No.3, 1970.

analogous correspondence to its actual historical context, second, its utopian promise of synthesis and last, the determining effect it subsequently had on the culture it Theorised. Certainly Wollen identified two Avant-Garde traditions, but they were not determined by an epic semiotic shift. In the context of the British Independent cinema, the destiny of the L.F.M.C. Avant-Garde was to create an autonomous film Art, whilst the destiny of the Independent Counter-Cinema was to aestheticise popular cinema. Which is to say that both factions served the Seventh Art : bourgeois cinema. Whereas Wollen's argument seems to be grounded in the formal criteria of experimental film, his dialectic actually depends upon the exclusion of not only all popular forms, but all pop/ Anti-Art forms, notably Underground cinema, Dada and Surrealist film, the popular experiments of Soviet experimental film, pre-1968 Godard.⁴⁷¹ Of course this exclusion can be rationalised and maintained through the logic of the Avant-Garde ; Wollen understands that only Art can be Avant-Garde. He is also right in identifying a Modernist shift in Cubism, however, he fails to recognise the decisive agency of the conflict between Art and popular culture in the Modernist shift. The *discoveries* of Cubism were not scientific explorations into the space between the signs, they were cultural strategies developed at the border of the popular. The development of Avant-Garde cinema was not the late flowering of a retarded aesthetic, it was essentially a bourgeois strategy to legitimise, gentrify, sedate and appropriate a threat to the hierarchy of Art.

The repressive agency of Wollen's model is exclusion. By invoking two apparently antithetical practices and the possibility of a utopian synthesis, his brief article seems to open up a critical space for cultural debate, experimentation and hybridisation. But in fact the exclusivity of Wollen's dialectic effectively precluded the consideration of alternate models of experimental film : the Underground, the popular and the amateur. Moreover, as the Independent sector developed into the 1970s the model of the Two Avant-Gardes became a legitimising discourse for key agencies of the Independent sector, most significantly it was the key note

⁴⁷¹ Of course another crucial exclusion is non European experimental film. The American Avant-Garde is briefly considered but only to except it from the equation. Nevertheless, Lauren Rabinowitz extends and critiques Wollen's binary in an American context in : Lauren Rabinowitz, *Ibid.* (1991). (P. 17-19).

document for the Edinburgh Film Festival 1976, it initiated a long running debate in *Afterimage*, and it was integrated into the ideological constitution of the B.F.I.

Wollen's Avant-Garde project was not only conceptual, in collaboration with Laura Mulvey he also attempted to synthesise the divided Avant-Garde in Counter-Cinema practice. The two films which exemplify and document this endeavour are *Pentheselia* (1974) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976). Both films are essentially attempts to politicise the aesthetic ; to structure experimental formal techniques with Theory : radical feminism, Marxism, semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis.⁴⁷² Wollen and Mulvey believed that Theory had to be central to Counter-Cinema, that demystification without Theory would be simply reactionary. The Counter-Cinema they offered was neither Godard or Le Grice, nor was it the epic synthesis of both. Against the hegemonic pleasure of popular mainstream cinema, Wollen and Mulvey constructed a Theoretical cinema. Which is to say, that apart from sporadic sequences of fragmented and mostly tedious audio/visual experiment, the overall effect of both films is of an illustrated lecture on film Theory and Greek mythology delivered direct to camera, by emotionless and classically educated bourgeois academics. Whilst Gidal and the Structural/Materialists developed a theory to legitimise their practice, Wollen and Mulvey literally made their Theory into a practice ; they actually became the authors of cinematic texts.

In 1984 Paul Willemen revised Wollen's model in his influential essay *An Avant-Garde for the 80's* which appeared in the *journal of new cinema* Framework. The editor at this time was Don Ranvaud, the associate editors were Willemen, Wollen and Mulvey. Willemen's revision was that the binary model still worked except that it misidentified the two traditions. Drawing on the work of Brecht, Benjamin and Andreas Huyssen, Willemen reformulated the binary division into that most Avant-Garde of oppositions, the revolutionary Artist vs. the reactionary Artist; in Willemen's model the Straub/Godard tradition is the radical socialist Avant-Garde

⁴⁷²Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Written Discussion', *Afterimage*, No. 6. Summer 1976. (P.30-40).

and the Co-Op movement is actually reactionary bourgeois Modernism.⁴⁷³ As key instances of the new radical Avant-Garde Willemen cites two recent productions from the B.F.I.

In rationalising this desperate repair Willemen comes close to acknowledging the instability in his argument :

In the light of the historical emergence of modernism, the split between modernism and the avantgarde cannot be mapped simply onto the bourgeois-working class distinction. Both artistic practices are firmly middle-class, as all professional art practices are. As far as class positions are concerned, artists must be seen as middle class intellectuals, and the divergence between avant-garde and modernism as opposing tendencies within the middle-class intelligentsia, each tendency engaging in politics for social change. One, as its name indicates, is a politics of modernisation, i.e. a bringing up to date of values and procedures in order to establish, maintain or preserve a bourgeois hegemony. The other is a politics of negation and transformation aligned with a process of change in a socialist direction, i.e. transformation instead of modernisation.⁴⁷⁴

Of course what Willemen does not acknowledge is that since the rage of Dada, to negate and transform Art is also to modernise Art. The dead end finally reached in the mid 1980s, by both the debate and the project of the Two Avant-Gardes, can be gauged by the fact that Willeman republished his revision virtually intact ten years later in his book *Looks and Frictions* (1994) under the title *An Avant Garde for the 90's*.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷³ Paul Willemen, *Ibid.* 1984..

⁴⁷⁴ Paul Willemen. 1984. *Ibid.* (P.58)

⁴⁷⁵ Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, BFI Publishing, London. 1994. (P.141-161)

Chapter Thirteen

A Brief Historical Overview of the Underground Cinema Resurgence : From the New York Cinema of Transgression to the New London Underground 1991-2003.

The dynamism and popularity of the inaugural Underground cinema movement was due first to its status as an integrated element of the 1960s Counterculture and second to its radical initiative in popularising experimental film culture. As the 1970s progressed the Counterculture in Europe and America lost its radical momentum whilst the Avant-Garde effectively institutionalised itself as the legitimate/ dominant form of experimental film (Art). However, this was not the end of either the Counterculture, or Underground cinema. In the face of a reactionary political backlash, comprehensive bourgeois appropriation, commodification, disenchantment and compromise, the Counterculture abandoned the naive optimism of the *Hippie Love Generation* and traced a darker subterranean course which retrenched Countercultural opposition as an ironic celebration of disillusion and negation : Punk Rock. Although Punk was vitalised by a new generation of disaffected youth, it was also the first rock subculture which had an intellectual grasp of its own historical context, and which used this consciousness to mythologise and sensationalise itself ; Punk was characteristically *fumiste*. Further, the formation of Punk in the late 1970s had direct links to the most radical factions of the 1960s Counterculture through key agents and influences.⁴⁷⁶ Most significantly, the Punk movement's core radical strategy was to eschew the realm of activity deemed political by the bourgeois State and to instead politicise culture. Learning from the vulnerabilities of the 1960s Counterculture, Punk specifically valorised the radical democratic and egalitarian aspects of popular culture : amateurism, conviviality, improvisation, illegitimacy, profanity, transgression and collectivity. Beyond music, Punk generated an eclectic and comprehensive recuperation of popular culture, Anti-Art, Bohemianism, Beat

⁴⁷⁶ Notably Malcolm McLaren who had been involved with the English Situationist group King Mob, and the MC5 rock group who worked with the New York Motherfuckers.

and the Counterculture. This process was incorporated into a further series of interlinked Post Punk subcultures which emerged in the early 1980s, most notably the fan culture surrounding cult/trash cinema and the prodigious expansion of fanzines and D.I.Y. publishing.

Although there were sporadic and fragmented instances of a British Punk cinema, the decisive and conscious renewal of a (Punk) Underground Cinema developed in New York around the end of the 1970s.⁴⁷⁷

Despite the institutionalisation of the Avant-Garde in the early 1970s, the New York Underground persisted through the activities of a cluster of highly influential makers including Jack Smith, John Waters and Mike and George Kuchar. The advent of Punk in the late 1970s opened up both a critical alternative to the Structuralist Avant-Garde aesthetic and a renewed allegiance between rock subculture and experimental film. Moreover, a crucial technological/industrial catalyst for the Punk Underground was the accelerating availability of cheap, efficient and automatic Super 8 equipment, and the introduction of integrated sync sound Super 8 in 1974 ; the amateur/illegitimate status of Super 8, and the immediacy/degradation of the home movie image, provided a dynamic visual correlative to Punk music.

The first cycle of the Underground renewal formed around the No Wave Punk scene of the Lower East Side, around bands that played at CBGB'S, the Mudd Club and Max's Kansas City : Richard Hell, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, the Lounge Lizards, DNA, The Contortions, Mars and others. The key makers were Vivienne Dick, Amos Poe, Eric Mitchell, James Nares, Becky Johnston and Beth and Scott B.⁴⁷⁸ Against the sedate minimalism and Modernism of the Avant-Garde, the No Wave makers produced no-budget Super 8 documentaries and ironic spectacles which parodied and celebrated 1960s Underground cinema, film noir, European Art-cinema and trash exploitation movies. The subjects/actors of these films were

⁴⁷⁷ The most prominent example of British Punk film was Don Letts' *the Punk Rock Movie*, a Super 8 documentary shot around the seminal Covent Garden Punk venue, the Roxy.

⁴⁷⁸ My principal source for this brief historical outline of the new American Underground cinema is Jack Sargeant, *Deathtripping : The Cinema of Transgression*. Creation Books, London. 1995.

mostly musicians and activists from the No Wave scene and many of the films were premiered at Punk clubs, Beth and Scott B.'s *The Offenders* (1979) was first screened as a serial, with weekly segments shown between bands at Max's Kansas City.⁴⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the No Wave eventually sought its own venue, and in the winter of 1979, the group set up the New Cinema in a rented storefront on St Marks Place, where they began regular screenings advertised by neighbourhood flyposting. However, the financial burden of running a permanent Underground venue closed the New Cinema after only a few months, and after this set back the group gradually fragmented into more established commercial and Artistic projects.

Whilst the No-Wave group operated outside the established Avant-Garde institutions, they did not deliberately develop this alternativity as an organised subversion of legitimate experimental film culture. However, around the early 1980s, a second Underground wave developed from the Lower East Side Punk scene which not only shunned the venues and institutions of Art, but which launched a subversive campaign against the Avant-Garde and academic film Theory. The Cinema of Transgression movement formed around the activities of a group of young makers and performers who shared and expanded the Lower East Side club scene initiated by the No Wave group. The leading makers included Nick Zedd, Richard Kern, Lydia Lunch, Tommy Turner, Cassandra Stark, Ela Troyano and Tessa Hughes-Freeland. Like the No Wave group, the Cinema of Transgression formed strategic links with the Punk music scene but followed that culture into the wilder Post-Punk of Sonic Youth, Foetus, Swans, Killdozer and G.G.Allin etc. Following the Post Punk trajectory, the makers of the group deliberately and ironically sought to outrage and incite their audiences by enacting spectacles of lurid violence, sex, drug use, blasphemy, obscenity and perversion. Crucially, the movement developed across the axis of film and performance: the makers played in bands, they staged performances and plays, they made Super 8 films, they projected multiple expanded cinema work, and they hybridised all these modes, live and in film. The live performances were characterised by

⁴⁷⁹ Jack Sargeant, *Ibid.* 1995. (P.16).

improvisation and audience participation - which was often involuntary and messy : Kern was infamous for attacking audience members and simulating injuries with fake blood.

The co-ordinating activist/polemicist of the Cinema of Transgression was Nick Zedd who first started making and performing in Punk clubs in the late 1970s. However, by the mid-1980s he had become totally frustrated by the exclusion of *transgressive* work from the venues and publications of the legitimate experimental film culture and so he initiated a deliberate strategy to promote and mythologise *transgression* as a coherent movement.⁴⁸⁰ In 1984 he started publishing the fanzine *Underground Film Bulletin* and in issue four he launched the manifesto of the Cinema of Transgression, written under the alias Orion Jeriko :

We who have violated the laws, commands and duties of the avant-garde; ie, to bore, tranquillise and obfuscate through a fluke process dictated by practical convenience stand guilty as charged. 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. We refuse to take their easy approach to cinematic creativity ; an approach which ruined the underground of the 1960s when the scourge of the film school took over. Legitimising every mindless manifestation of sloppy movie making undertaken by a generation of misled film students emulating the failures of profoundly undeserving non-talents like Brakhage, Snow, Frampton, Gehr, Breer, etc; the dreary media arts centres and geriatric cinema critics have totally ignored the exhilarating accomplishments of[...].a new generation of filmmakers daring to rip out of the stifling straight jackets of film theory in a direct attack on every value system known to man. We propose that all film schools be blown up and all boring films never be made again. We propose that a sense of humour is an essential element discarded by the doddering academics and further, that any film that doesn't shock isn't worth looking at.⁴⁸¹

At their best the Cinema of Transgression movement produced visceral and compulsive films which celebrated the dangerous borderland of grotesque comedy, sexual liberation and vertiginous horror, at their worst they were incompetent adolescent pretension, often they were an uncanny combination of both extremes. In fact, and despite, their street outlaw stance, most of the

⁴⁸⁰ The term 'transgressive' was first coined by Soho Weekly News critic Amy Taubin in 1979 about Zedd's film *They Eat Scum*. See Jack Sargeant, *Ibid.* 1995.(P.25).

⁴⁸¹ Compiled in Jack Sargeant, *Ibid.* 1995.(P.76-77).

Transgressive makers had academic training : Nick Zedd had dropped out of Art school, Kern studied philosophy and Art at the University of North Carolina, Tessa Hughes-Freeland was taking a Masters Program in Cinema Studies etc. But it was this ambivalent disillusion/interaction with the academy that fuelled the Transgressive strategy ; they sought an alternative to both sedate commercial cinema and the Avant-Garde. The overriding significance of the group was that they promulgated and rejuvenated the Underground as a radical pop culture and consequently reactivated the potential for a national Underground network in the 1990s.

Three crucial interlinked factors in the development and expansion of the new American Underground movement were video distribution, fanzines and the development of Underground festivals. The New York Film Festival Downtown was organised by Tessa Hughes-Freeland and Ela Troyano, and ran annually from 1984 to 1990. Screenings at the Downtown festival were convivial hybrids of film/video, performance, expanded cinema and music, compered by local celebrity MC's. The festival proved a dynamic showcase for both the established Underground movement and new makers such as John Moritsugu, Todd Haynes and Kembra Pfahler. Parallel to the festival Nick Zedd and others began to develop mail order video distribution for Underground film and promote this initiative through the growing cluster of fanzines which combined a fascination for cult/trash popular film with coverage of the Underground, the most influential and widely distributed of these was *Film Threat* founded by Chris Gore in 1985. Although the Downtown festival lapsed in 1990 the American Underground scene continued to develop through the 1990s and gradually across the nation a network of Micro-Cinema screening clubs emerged. As the internet became widely available Underground/Micro-Cinema web sites proliferated and a potential national distribution/exhibition network began to develop. In 1993 the Chicago Underground Film Festival was founded, followed by the New York Underground Film festival in 1994 and Underground festivals in Seattle, Baltimore, Boston, Las Vegas, San Francisco and Washington DC. Festivals were

also founded in Canada which had developed its own Punk Underground scene in the late 1980s, the most celebrated maker being Bruce LaBruce.

Although New York was a key influence and an industrial centre, the American Underground resurgence should be understood as a resurfacing rather than a spontaneous generation ; many of the clubs and makers that emerged in the early 1990s had actually developed in relative seclusion. The determining factors are more complex, but the priority must be given to Punk D.I.Y. culture, accelerating access to cheap film/ video equipment and increasing opposition to the Avant-Garde. Meanwhile, parallel to the New York Underground resurgence a similar culture was emerging in London, but whilst the New York experimental film scene had never completely lost its Underground potential, London had become the dead heart of the Independent sector.

The institutionalisation of the Avant-Garde, and the development of the Independent sector, effectively annexed and suppressed the anarchic potential of the British Underground. But this repression was not total, for the fragmented Underground still surfaced sporadically, almost unconscious of its own tradition. In the late 1970s there was a brief Punk film movement and in the 1980s there was the Community Video Movement (Sheffield Video Workshop, Community Video Workshop Cardiff etc.), the Super 8 New Romantics (Ceryth Wynn Evans, John Maybury etc.), the Scratch Video makers (George Barber, Gorilla Tapes etc.) and the D.I.Y. activism of the Build Hollywood group. The eventual resurgence of the London Underground cinema in the early 1990s can be traced to the point where the Counterculture resurfaced and the last vestiges of alternativity where dropped by the Independent sector.

Whilst the anti-politics of British Punk was an effective strategy against the logic of bourgeois annexation, it also tended to frustrate the formation of organised Countercultural protest/ projects. Nevertheless there were a series of radical currents which intertwined into the late 1980s : the radical feminist peace movement, the free festival Crusty/ traveller subculture, the urban squatters

network, the anarcho-populist Class War group, the fanzine/ mailart network and the post-Situationist provocations of groups such as Karen Eliot and *Smile* magazine. The eventual coalition of these currents was activated by the campaign against the Poll Tax in the late 1980s which culminated in the exultant Poll Tax riot of 1990. However this carnival of dissent was soon eclipsed by the inevitable build up to the first Gulf War.

Parallel to these developments, no budget/ amateur filmmaking was transformed by a rapid expansion in home video technology, availability and ownership. This had three key effects, first cheap user friendly video camcorders fostered a wave of amateur activity, home-made and screened on domestic televisions. Second, as thousands of households bought into video they disposed of their amateur Cine equipment which became available at incredibly low prices at the car boot sales which swept the country from the late 1980s. Third, with the advent of *Home Cinema* video systems manufacturers brought the first cheap domestic video projectors onto the market, making video cinema screening a possibility for the no budget maker. The significance of the no-budget economy for the new Underground should not be underestimated, many of the activists and filmmakers involved are part of a London Bohemian subculture which subsists on welfare, part time work, fraud and general dodginess, a sort of suburban hunter/ gatherer culture which has totally abandoned the official *Brand New* consumer economy and exists on the cast off commodities from car boot sales, jumble sales, skips and market stalls. Moreover, some of the Underground makers are so socially *dysfunctional* that they have effectively disbarred themselves from the career structures of the professional media industry. This creates an interesting paradox, for whilst the media establishment perceives the Postmodernist cutting edge to be at the frontiers of digital technology the new Underground, (which is certainly the most adept cultural producer of radical montage, collage, detournment, intertextuality and self-referentiality) often works with the outmoded detritus of the industrial age.

Increased access to projection technology was also a crucial factor in the development of London rave culture in the late 1980s. The advent of Techno,

Ecstasy, mass illegal raves, and psychedelic retro styling created a new demand for club visuals. Filmmakers collaborated with promoters, dance clubs and DJ's to produce spectacular multiple projections using film, 35 mm slides and ultimately video projection. By the early 1990s a group of Video Jockeys (V.J.'s) had emerged armed with cheap video projectors and vision mixers who could mix moving images live to music. A complementary development was the Chill Out Room where the frazzled intoxicated dancers could relax for a while and watch cool visuals.

The final factor in the renovation of the Underground was the emergence of a British trash/Underground film fanzine subculture. A critical influence on this subculture was the import of American fanzines, notably *Film Threat* and *the Incredibly Strange Films* issue of *(Re)search*. Leading British zines/imprints which emerged in the early 1990s were *Creation Books*, *Headpress*, *Samhain* and *Rapid Eye*. Allied to the zines was the development of a nascent British video distribution network, notably from Visionary Communications (formerly Jettisoundz) and Ikon which both primarily distributed Post-Punk music videos but also distributed Underground film including work by work by Anger and Burroughs/Balch. Together these diverse elements formed the context for the return of the London Underground Cinema.

In February 1991 London was snowbound while the Gulf War raged. At the height of the air strikes a desperate seance was held at the Riverside Studios in the Hammersmith slush, and this was called the BP EXPO, a festival of British and International Student Film and Video. Amongst those linking hands were Artists, Independent filmmakers and delegates from the BFI, the Arts Council and Greater London Arts (replaced by the LFDVA in 1992). They were trying to raise the spirit of Independence. Debate was minimal, the fact that the event was sponsored by a multinational oil company during an oil war caused only slight ironic embarrassment.

Meanwhile, in Camden, the L.F.M.C. was locked into an endless series of bitter feuds, schisms and scandals, mostly concerning money, power and the possibility of a move to new premises (The Lux); its screenings were sparse and often deserted. Actually, the social ambience at the Co-Op had been tense and inhospitable since the mid 1980s, and even if not by design, this tended to alienate all but the most assertive and compatible candidates.

What remained of the Avant-Garde and the Independent film/video sector had become a closed circuit of State agencies, desperately underfunded workshops and an elite circle of established Artists and production companies locked into mutual self legitimisation. Unfunded experimental makers were effectively excluded from all the established routes to exhibition/distribution, and those who didn't desist were forced to spend their time and energy competing against each other for funding from agencies who had become so disengaged from economic and public accountability that they were both the critics and the audience of their own product. By creating a vertical State monopoly the '*Independent sector*' had at last become truly autonomous. What got funded was good, what was good got funded and what did not get funded remained invisible.

The only glimmer of hope against this incestuous network was a cluster of sporadic and fragmented Underground activities around South London, notably the work of the filmmakers at Ken McDonald's *Reel Love* Super 8 screenings, David Leister's fabulous *Kino Club*, the Strand Super 8 Workshop in Brixton and Lepke B.'s incredible low-fi club visuals. Ken McDonald had run a screening club on the New York Underground scene of the early 1980s. The Kino Club was a one man cinema cabaret held mostly in the back rooms of pubs which featured David's films, weird found footage, competitions and live musicians playing improvised film soundtracks.

That summer a group called Pullit squatted a derelict suntan oil factory on Effra Road in Brixton, this was the Cooltan and it soon became an Underground cultural centre housing a gallery, theatre, performance space, rave venue, cafe and

office for the Brixton Green Party. At the very back of the ground floor, a cinema was built into what was once a cold storage room with a sliding steel door. On the door in red wooden letters was spelt out The Regal. Around June, Ken McDonald, filmmaker and impresario moved his Reel Love show to the Regal. Reel Love was a regular open screening of Super 8 films punctuated by technical breakdowns and drinking to excess. Around the same time Stephen Houston began to organise weekly open meetings of people interested in getting involved with film/video at the Cooltan.

Out of this activity a group of no - budget film \ video makers emerged with the idea of forming a South London based media collective, the weekly meetings developed into open screenings where anyone could show their work and slowly a hard core membership developed which included Stephen Houston, Kathy Gibbs, Jenny Marr, Danny Holman, Laura Hudson , Suzanne Currid, Jennet Thomas, Anthony Kopiecki, Lorelei Hawkins, Lepke B. , William Thomas and me.

From the very beginning we decided to be totally open and democratic , anyone could show their work, anyone could join the group, all you had to do was come to a meeting and get involved. We drew up a loose constitution, the group was to be non-profit making, all work would be voluntary, no wages would be paid, all the money we made would be used to run our screenings and to buy collectively owned equipment. I drafted the constitution myself and I based it on the radical democratic model of the L.F.M.C., but I tried to incorporate safeguards against the careerist manipulations, factionalism and bureaucracy that dogged the Co-Op.

As winter approached the Pullit group and Reel Love left the Cooltan and the organisation was taken over by a council of representatives from the various activity groups who were working at the building. The film \ video group took over the Regal and we held public screenings of no - budget film and video, but it was freezing cold , damp and it stank. Even with their coats on the audience froze, so we moved the cinema to the Cooltan Cafe and began to hold fortnightly open screenings called Cinema Cafe.

The Cafe was housed in the old factory canteen, the far wall held a sweeping wooden counter behind which lay a vast iron stove. For tables there were several giant industrial cable spools laid horizontally, the place could hold about 75 at a push. We held our bi-weekly screenings on Friday nights, we showed Super 8, Standard 8 and 16 mm on a screen above the counter and VHS video on a TV in the opposite corner, most of the equipment was lent by members or their friends. The Cafe had a sound system so we borrowed a microphone and took it in turns to M.C. the show. We cooked and sold hot food and cheap beer. One night a projector broke down and so to fill the gap Jenny Marr sang a couple of songs. After that we introduced regular performance work, live music, live dialogue with film, shadow puppets and 35 mm slide shows. In the early days most of the work and performances came from members of the group, which meant that we had to constantly produce new work, but through publicity and word of mouth non-members work began to fill the programmes. After a few shows we gave up previewing the work and just showed whatever makers wanted to screen and let the audience judge for themselves. Danny Holman had made a film about the LA Underground scene and I had researched the 1960s London Underground, but in truth we developed our practices from necessity, experiment and audience interaction. Bored by the sedate and puritan format of established Independent film/ video screenings we began to develop techniques of combination and mutation, and to create a hybrid fusion of projection, performance and convivial interaction. We projected slides and Super 8 loops on the walls and windows of the Cafe, we screened home movies, splatter horror, experimental video, drama, porn, documentaries, scratch Super 8, rave visuals, kitsch melodrama, animation and found-footage back to back. We introduced the makers and encouraged them to debate their work with the audience, we produced a programme \fanzine for each show and we distributed leaflets and propaganda all over London. If the audience found the work 'boring' or 'bad' we encouraged them to make better work themselves, if our equipment broke down we asked the audience to help us fix it and we discovered that if you created a space where anything could happen and if you included the audience into the action then it didn't really matter what went wrong.

As our events evolved and mutated we named ourselves *The Exploding Cinema* and began a cycle of venue changes, moving on whenever things got too predictable. After the eviction from Cooltan we first moved to a vegetarian cafe in Clapham in June 1992 and then to an immense hall at the back of an old pub in Borough in March 1993. The earliest shows had consisted of about ten films with an audience of around thirty, within a year we were showing over twenty films per show to an average audience of two hundred a night. With the money we began to make on the door we were able to buy our own projection and sound equipment and become self sufficient without State intervention or funding of any kind.

As the collective expanded and developed a group of member/makers formed whose work was regularly screened, including Me, Jennet Thomas, Lepke B, Colette Rouhier, Paul Tarrago, Donal Rouane, Caroline Kennedy, Andre Stitt, Susanne Currid and Antony Kopieki. As word spread about the screenings a hidden Underground subculture contacted us, many who had been making films in relative seclusion for years, including Arthur Lager, Andrew Coram, Rob Ryan, Victoria Kirkwood, the Lovely Movies group, Mix Up, Vito Rocco, Dick Jewel, Mark Video, Mark Conway and Alan Dein. Moreover, the D.I.Y. and convivial spirit of the Exploding Cinema meant that some makers actually began to make work specifically to be screened at our shows, and some audience members began to experiment with film/video for the first time.

With only a vague knowledge of the historic precedent of the Cinema of Transgression, the Exploding constituted itself as a project against the repression of the Avant-Garde and the Independent sector. This radicalism was both intrinsic and active. From the early years we published and distributed polemical pamphlets and flyers against the vertical monopoly of the Independent sector and distributed these leaflets at our shows, and at Independent screenings and events. Perhaps the most celebrated and enduring was the rant *Fuck off Avant-Gardist* which I wrote around July 1992 :

For how much longer must the underground tolerate your elite nepotistic enclave, your sacred art object economy, your white male liberal guilt complex, your public school Masonic fraternity, your fish fetish, your shaved heads, your artist anal craft professionalism, your adolescent narcissism, your psycho linguistic gobbledygook, your cottage in Provence, your rabid careerism, your bogus radicalism, your half naked relatives, your intellectual bankruptcy, your art school tutorials, your intoxicated brown nosing, your catholic opera cult, your international bourgeois tourism, your water rituals, your meaningful silence, your State funded cynicism, your sado-masochistic posturing, your inability to comprehend film as anything other than your archaic fine arts mysticism, your fashion victims, your fields of wheat, your church based installation worship, your desperate search for marginality, your corrupt non-industry, your contempt for anyone outside of your pathetic clique, your boring, lazy, unwatchable films, your computer video masturbation, your insatiable egomania.

It was you who consigned the underground to twenty years of drivel, we've had enough so fuck off.

Aside from the regular bi-weekly shows we began to organise special one-off shows, and one of the first of these was an event which got us national press coverage and a cult reputation.⁴⁸² In the summer of 1993 we were contacted by a group of squatters who had taken over the Lido in Brockwell Park, between Brixton and Herne Hill. The Lido was a derelict, 1950s pop-Modernist municipal outdoor swimming pool surrounded by a high wall and a series of buildings formerly offices, a cafe, changing rooms and showers. The squatters had been holding parties and raves and they offered us the space for an Exploding Cinema event. In turn we contacted makers and performers and organised a series of meetings to plan the event. The more we planned, the more ambitious the event became, finally it developed into an anarchic all night spectacular with a cinema installed in the empty pool, a video/performance show in the offices, a chill out space in the cafe and installations in the showers and changing rooms. As the audience entered into the flickering celestial glow of the Lido they were welcomed with a vast banner across the poolside which read *Welcome to hell*. We showed over seventy films/videos including feature films and performance/expanded cinema work. There was also food and drink, live music, a Countercultural bookstall, a teepee, a wandering hairdresser, pyrotechnics and a dazzling rooftop performance from the Loophole Cinema group. For publicity we sent out a press release and some photos of the pool ; Time Out ran a feature and we got on local

⁴⁸² See for instance the article on the Lido event by David Eimer in *The Face*, No. 60 September 1993 (P.144-145) and also Sean O'Hagan, 'Against the Tide', in *the Guardian*, August 9 1993 (P.7)

radio. When we opened the doors there was a queue round the block, we were expecting an audience of around 600, nearly 2,000 came.

Contiguous to the resurgence of the Underground was the renewal of an organised Counterculture. In the early 1990s a network of eco-activists and anti-road protesters (re) invented and deployed a dynamic repertoire of direct action/performance protest techniques against a range of State/commercial aggression; the destruction of ancient woodland, the Criminal Justice Bill, anti-squatting legislation, the Arms Industry etc. ⁴⁸³ One of the seminal formations of this movement was the Dongas Tribe, a group that coalesced around the Twyford Down protest camp in 1992, and hybridised new age mysticism, eco-activism and the free festival/Crusty traveller subculture. This hybrid developed through the 1990s by way of the temporary autonomous zones of Wanstonia and Claremont Road in the anti M11 struggle. The build up to the Criminal Justice Bill around 1994 further radicalised and united the diverse currents of the Counterculture, since it specifically targeted Countercultural activity : protest, hunt sabotage, squatting and illegal raves. This renewed Countercultural activism eventually became known as the DiY movement and it culminated in the formation of the Reclaim The Streets group in 1995 and the anti-capitalist demonstrations of the late 1990s.

Participant in this Countercultural renewal was the development of an Underground Agit-Prop video movement comparable to the Agit-Prop collectives of the 1960s. This movement developed as Video Activism, and the key agents were the Oxford based *Undercurrents* group, the *Conscious Cinema* group of Brighton and the older *Despite TV* group. *Undercurrents* was a biannual 2 hour video compilation of news/documentary made by, for and about activists involved in road protest, green politics, rave culture, animal liberation , squatting and anarcho/liberation. The most striking development in the Video Activist movement was the use of the video camcorder as a media weapon documenting police violence and exposing illegal State/corporate activity , most significantly the

⁴⁸³ For an overview of the 1990s protest movement see: George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty* , Verso, London 1996. Also the collection of essays : George McKay (ed.) *DiY Culture* , Verso, London. 1998.

presence of a camcorder at the site of protest was used by the activists as a defence against such violence and a threat of its exposure. Although the video activists weren't directly involved in exhibition there was a highly motivated and effective informal Underground network of screenings often at raves, festivals and the growing number of Underground cinema clubs.

Inspired by the Exploding, makers Philip Ilson and Tim Harding set up *the Halloween Society* cinema club in 1993. A year later Steven Eastwood initiated *Omsk* an Underground cinema/performance club. And from the mid 1990s a subculture of clubs developed including *Films That Make You Go HmMMMM*, *Kinokulture*, *My Eyes My Eyes*, *Cinergy*, *Shaolin*, *Renegade Arts* and *Peeping Toms* in London, *Vision Collision* in Manchester, *Head Cleaner* in Coventry, *Junk TV* in Brighton, and *Dazzle !* in Plymouth. Other groups have also formed under the name Exploding Cinema, in Amsterdam, Frankfurt and most recently in Los Angeles.

Over the last ten years the Exploding Cinema has screened more than fifteen hundred unfunded no-budget films/videos in squats, pubs, clubs, cafes and church halls, we have staged one off shows in disused factories, a church, a circus tent, on rooftops, and an old Victorian school. Internationally we've staged shows in Dublin, New York, Prague (1997), Cologne and Frankfurt (1998), toured Germany with the German Underground *Kaos Film Gruppe* (1994) and toured Belgium and Holland with *Kino Trotter*, a Brussels based Underground film group (1995). Most recently we showed a programme of work at the *6th Annual New York Underground Film Festival* (March 10-14 1999). The Exploding was also a core organiser of the *VOLCANO!!! Underground Film Festival* (1996-2000) an annual event in which most of the London Underground film groups come together for two weeks to stage a city wide multi venue collective celebration of low/no budget Underground film and video. Aside from exhibition we have distributed a video compilation of British Underground work, *Vacuum* (1996) and we have a highly influential web site which includes an update on our shows, advice on setting up your own Underground club and an archive of rants and propaganda.

Nevertheless, despite the success and rapid expansion of the new British Underground, and after ten years of activism, it has become clear that there are limits to the movement's development. For Underground cinema to become a practice in which makers could at least recover their production costs or even earn enough to make a living, it would be necessary to develop a popular, commercial and national distribution/exhibition industry. In America the Underground is still expanding, video and DVD distribution is becoming coordinated over the web, independent video rental shops are beginning to stock short film compilations and Underground festivals now get comprehensive sponsorship from major commercial companies. But in London the struggle to develop an Underground industry has reached an invisible perimeter, and a critical element of this complex limit is the ideology and institutions of Art and the Independent sector. The Underground still has to compete, both industrially and ideologically, with the financial and institutional power of State Art.

The movement is caught in a paradox : so long as the ideology, institutions and financial power of State Art can co-opt the key agents and cultural products of the Underground it will be almost impossible to develop a popular experimental industry, but only a popular experimental industry will free the Underground from the repression of State Art. Moreover, most Underground activists have no understanding of this paradox, or of the historical struggle in which they have become involved. The official history of experimental cinema is still controlled and maintained by the academics of State Art, and this control has not been diminished by the rise of the Underground and the fall of the Lux. On the contrary the spectre of the Underground has galvanised the complacent agents of the

Avant-Garde into renewed projects to secure their monopoly. ⁴⁸⁴ The

⁴⁸⁴ Ironically, the renewed repression of the Avant-Garde/Independent sector has actually been augmented by the trash/cult film fanzine subculture, which although it promotes American Underground cinema, has resolutely failed to recognise and promote the British Underground. As I have noted, this exoticism has always been a feature of British cinema intellectuals, but in the case of the trash/cult subculture it appears as an irrational ambivalence to the legitimacy of culture ; the trash/cult fans have fetishised the visceral thrills of subversion but only if that subversion is legitimised and objectified in the authenticity of America. This fan fetish also makes trash/cult subculture amenable to co-option by the Avant-Garde/Independent sector since they can appropriate the products of the American Underground without risk to their native power base. For instance, in the late 1990s, the B.F.I. launched a new series of video compilations, the History of the Avant-Garde , with the compilation : *Cinema of Transgression*. The tape included work by Zedd, Kern and Tessa Hughes-Frøeland.

consecration of the term *Film and Video Art* in the mid 1990s should be seen as a strategy in this process. A more concrete strategy was the founding in 2002 of the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection at the Arts and Humanities Research Board (A.H.R.B.): Centre for British Film and Television Studies, at Central Saint Martins School of Art and Design. The Centre is a major research project directed by Laura Mulvey, the Artists Study Collection is essentially an audio/visual, textual and on-line archive of the Avant-Garde developed by Curtis and LeGrice. So far the only critical activity of the Study centre has been to develop research and debate around the history of State funding for experimental film. 485

⁴⁸⁵The Junior Research fellow 2002-2003 was Michael Maziere , who in November 2000 suddenly lost his job as Director of the Lux, shortly before the true depth of the financial crisis was discovered. The circumstances of Maziere's departure remained obscure since the employees of the Lux were forbidden to discuss the issue. See Benedict Seymour, 'The Last Picture Show', *Mute Magazine* , Issue 22. Jan. 2002. Online version at <http://www.metamute.com>

Resolution

A Poetics for the Subversive Elements of Pop : Strategies for the New Underground.

The Lux Centre for Film, Video and New Media failed because the project was riddled with the unreconciled tensions of the Art/non-Art binary and betrayed by the agencies of the State. Whilst the new London Underground developed a broad popular and commercial audience for experimental film, the Lux lay fatally stranded in its Modernist institute, captive to the elite sedation and bogus radicalism of the Avant-Garde. But the fall of the Lux was far from the end of the new Art.

As the 1990s progressed the historic process of cultural nationalisation was reinvigorated by unprecedented State investment and co-ordinated initiatives to *popularise* Art. A culminating and exemplary event in this process was the opening of the vast new Tate Modern (Art) Museum in London in May 2000. The Modern is the latest addition to the extensive South Bank complex of national State culture which began with the Festival of Britain in 1951, and which now includes the National Film Theatre, the Museum of The Moving Image, the Imax Cinema, the Hayward Gallery, the National Theatre, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Royal Festival Hall. Converted from a former power station, it cost over 134 million pounds of public and private money, it will be a lasting monument to the modern State and to the public and private partnership. In the vaults, famous and infamous work has been assembled and preserved. Duchamp's urinal has been restored to its original finish by dedicated conservationists who for many hours, in rubber gloves, have dabbed its mottled surface with tiny cotton buds. And it is a culminating triumph in the rebirth of British Art, Young British Art, which salted amongst the modern masterpieces gives a reciprocal new context and continuity.

Whilst Artist's film and video was an integrated element from the opening of the Tate Modern, in the wake of the failed Lux, closer vital links were forged by the

key agents of the Avant-Garde, crucially, *Shoot, Shoot, Shoot !*, a major Lux retrospective of work from the first decade of the L.F.M.C. was transferred from the defunct Lux to the Tate Modern in May 2002. ⁴⁸⁶

Once, obscured by fog, its great turbines sparking and droning, the Bankside power station provided light, heat and power for thousands of homes. Now by electronic and digital media a new power is transmitted, the power of the Postmodern rehabilitation of Art. In the mythic Postmodern, the *other*, the marginalised and the excluded are gathered into an exciting heterogeneous spectrum of culture. Old enmities are reconciled, past fallibilities forgiven. British culture once riven by a terrible polarity between the high and the low now becomes a dynamic melting pot where all culture is equivalent and available. In the galleries of the Tate Modern televisions and projections flicker, in the bookshop you can buy Dada tee shirts and Situationist manifestos, and at the lavish openings Artists, media executives and corporate sponsors mingle in their evening wear.

In her engaging and irreverent re-evaluation of Postmodern culture, *Window Shopping* (1993), Anne Friedberg draws on the work of Peter Bürger, Richard Abel, Frederic Jameson, Peter Wollen and others in an attempt to answer a crucial problem afflicting Postmodern Theory : *Why doesn't the concept of the Postmodern work for cinema ?* ⁴⁸⁷ Leaving aside Friedberg's conclusions, the problem can be formulated like this : if we take the decisive juncture, the shift from the Modern to the Post-modern, as dating from a cluster of events and formations around the late 1950s/ early 1960s, Pop Art, Warhol, John Cage, Robert Venturi's architectural manifesto *Learning From Las Vegas* etc. ⁴⁸⁸ And if we sidestep the

⁴⁸⁶ See *Shoot Shoot Shoot : the First decade of the London Film-Makers Co-Operative and British Underground Film 1966-76* at the Tate Modern 3 May -28 May 2002. Remarkably at the recent conference *Experimental Film Today* (University of Central Lancashire, Preston July 4th -July 6th 2003), Julia Knight gave a paper *Reaching Audiences - the Role of a Distributor* which attempted to mythologise *Shoot Shoot Shoot* as the rediscovery of an obscure, neglected and underprivileged cause.

⁴⁸⁷ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping*, University of California Press, Berkeley. 1993. (P. 157-177)

⁴⁸⁸ Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' (1982) in Hal Foster (ed.) *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Press, London. 1985..(P.111)

more euphoric/schizophrenic aspects of Postmodern Theory, and take a broad definition of Postmodern aesthetics as a tendency against the pure abstraction of Modernism, and towards eclecticism, collage, pastiche, allegory, nostalgia, intertextuality, self-referentiality and the playful. Then it would seem that the Postmodern happened in cinema *before* the Modern. The entry of Art into the field of cinema, the French Avant-Garde of the 1920s, was simultaneously the entry of Modernism, but the most advanced form of cinematic Modernism actually developed with Structuralism, twenty years after the Postmodern shift. Moreover, popular cinema seemed to have had *Postmodern aesthetics* from its very inception, or to be more precise popular cinema seems to have been a product of *Postmodern aesthetics*. The aesthetics *discovered* by the Postmodern Theorists can clearly be seen operating in popular culture long before the Postmodern juncture, in pantomime, melodrama, music hall, serial fiction, comic books, cinema etc. Which is to say that the Postmodern shift only has conceptual integrity as a shift in bourgeois culture ; the vertigo of Postmodernism is the realisation by the bourgeoisie that Art is not the only culture, and nor is it eternal or sacred. ⁴⁸⁹ Postmodernism is no more than the latest and most systematic attempt by the institution of Art to appropriate, sedate and gentrify the radical popular. It is essentially a rationalisation in which the forms and strategies of the radical popular, Anti-Art and commercial mass media are aesthetised into insignificance.

The conflict between Underground Cinema and the Avant-Garde is a component of the historical conflict between the radical popular and Art. And this conflict is no less than a struggle for the control and purpose of culture. So long as Art is able to maintain its institutional hierarchy, legitimate cultural expression will be the privilege of an elite caste of bourgeois professionals. The incredible speed of technological development has initiated the *potential* for an anarchic international digital cinema network, and yet experimental film/video is still held in thrall to the aura of feudal power. The Dadaists knew in 1916 that the only radical Art project

⁴⁸⁹ See for instance the formative essay by Susan Sontag, 'One Culture and the New Sensibility' (1965) collected in Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London. 1968.(P.293-304).

is the destruction of Art. But the Oedipal struggle of Anti-Art will always lead back to the pantheon.

The agents and institutions of Film and Video Art control an extensive educational and industrial network legitimised by their exclusive and specialised aesthetic expertise. The Underground is a threat to this expertise and so the State sector has attempted to both negate and appropriate it. Against this repression the mere existence and continuity of the new Underground is a startling achievement since it involves constant resistance to normalised elitism, cynicism, co-option and nepotism. Nevertheless, the dilemma now facing many of the makers and activists of the new Underground is to either dedicate themselves to years more unpaid *amateurism* in the uncertain hope of eventually constructing a viable industrial network, or simply drift into cynical pragmatism and join the State sector. The only alternative for the Underground is to develop a radical praxis, which would positively motivate and radicalise Underground activists, but which would also be ideologically and industrially toxic to the State sector. To do this the Underground must finally relinquish the utopian myths of Art and actuate the radical strategies of the popular.

Following the historical trajectory from Carnival to the Counterculture a poetics can be composed for the radical elements of popular culture. This poetics is principally based on the history of English popular culture, a reinterpretation of Bahktin's concept of Carnival and formative critical attempts to devise binary theoretical models for oppositions between Folklore and literature, and between oral culture and literature.⁴⁹⁰ And last, but not least, it draws upon the totality of my Underground praxis.

You will remember that Bahktin identified in Carnival a combination of essential interlocking factors: Carnival is alternative, participatory, ambivalent, material, utopian, anarchic, transgressive and unfinished. Tracing the shifts of these factors

⁴⁹⁰ Respectively, Joseph J. Arpad, *Between Folklore and Literature: Popular Culture as Anomaly*, in the *Journal of Popular Culture* No.9, 1975. (P.404). and J. Fiske and J. Hartley in *Reading Television*, Methuen, London 1978. (P. 124-125).

as they run through illegitimate cultural history into the 20th century, it is possible to identify a repertoire of radical subversions against the bourgeois State in both its official cultural sphere (Art) and its industrial structures :

- Convivial** Radical popculture promotes interactive participation between the work and the audience. The work is a product of this interaction. The *play* is characterised by an equality between performers and spectators which acknowledges the presence and unity of a shared humanity.
- Consensual** Whilst Naturalism/Realism seeks to subject its characters to scientific objective scrutiny without seeking consent, pop narrative seeks a convention between audience and performer. Pop is consensual, Naturalism is coercive and colonial.
- Illegitimate** Popculture developed outside and between the gaps of official culture. State Prohibition, suppression, fear and disgust were key factors in the development of pop and have made it flexible, evasive and resistant to repression.
- Profane** Against the sacred aura of Art popculture is irreverent, shoddy, provisional, temporary and human.
- Subversive** Popculture refuses to take Art seriously. Pop is not auratic it is amiable, chaotic and confrontational.
- Resilient** In spite of prohibition and repression pop can abide, function underground without resources, lie dormant for many years and still return triumphant. Pop is a celebration, its meaning cannot be understood from the origin or

occasion of the celebration but only as the action of the celebration.

- Montage** Pop culture negates aura and Author/ity by materialising its collective origin. It assembles and combines work from the diversity of culture using techniques of collage, quotation, compendium, pastiche, parody and plagiarism. It is a tradition which syncretically incorporates its own history.
- Variation** A key formal technique of popculture is that work proceeds by the repetition and variation of a repertoire of standard conventional elements. Innovation takes place not by reaction and rejection, but by prototype, variation and transformation.
- Improvisation** The structure of prototype and variation allows makers to take a conventional form and play with the possibility of its variants. eg. the comedy sketch, the western, Be-Bop jazz etc.
- Anonymity** Popculture negates Author/ity and this anonymity is reinforced by industrial organisation and mechanical reproduction. Popculture is a network of anonymous makers, collective production, intertextuality, plagiarism, pseudonyms and disguise.
- Indiscretion** Without Author/ity pop is free to blur and transcend the discrete borders between works, genres, medias, activities....Popculture is intertextual and self reflexive, it plays between the concrete and the mythic. Narratives are episodic /serialised, variants. Fictional characters transcend mediums and can even enter popculture as collective

identities. Popculture is never finished it can always be changed, updated, remade.

- Mongrel** The combination and transgression of popculture constantly creates new variant and hybrid cultural forms.
- Marvellous** The shift towards realism/ anti-illusionism which characterises the modernist Art of the late 19th and early 20th century is essentially insignificant to the pop tradition since figurative/ narrative popculture is not based on mimetic illusion but convention. In dramatic terms the fundamental imperative of popculture is the spectacular and material enactment of the allegorical; it is fabulous and material. eg. pantomime, melodrama, crime thrillers etc. Popculture is not bound to the either /or - realist vs. fantastic binary of Art, popculture plays between planes of performance, narrative and actuality.
- Simultaneous** Popculture has no progress, it does not improve and it does not decline. Moreover all historical pop culture is becoming available simultaneously. Changes in the fashion of popculture are not legitimised by concepts of perfectibility or utility, but by desire.
- Collective** The creative montage of pop culture tends towards collective creation by multiple agents. Improvisation tends to negate centralised and hierarchical control.
- Illiterate** Historically pop culture has both developed for an audience with no formal education and has been prohibited from using spoken dialogue. Consequently it has developed in primarily audio-visual forms.

Commercial As an unofficial/illegitimate culture pop has rarely received institutional or State finance and has therefore developed as a commercial enterprise. However, this commercialism has often taken the subversive forms of profit sharing, plagiarism, piracy and bootlegging.

The new Underground Cinema already deploys most of these cultural strategies but now it must understand their meaning and begin to dedicate them to a revolutionary experimental purpose.

The post-war Avant-Garde/Independent movement sought an autonomous cinema free from the repression of bourgeois capitalism. The fatal and inherent flaw in this endeavour was the utopian assumption that autonomy is possible within capitalism, and it was this that doomed them to the fetishised and bogus realm of State Art. Whilst Countercultural movements have developed radical strategies of resistance and alternativity to capitalism, they have only done so through active engagement, subversion, and imaginative innovation.

Underground Cinema is chaotic and indiscrete, and it still rages with the unresolved tensions of its hybrid development. Against the factory production of mass popular cinema the Underground empowers and celebrates the lone worker, against the myth of the genius Artist it deploys collective and convivial production. The hope of the Underground lies in the subversive strategies of the radical popular, the hope of radical experimental cinema lies in the Underground.

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This is divided into four sections :

1. Books.
2. Articles/Journals.
3. Catalogues/Reports.
4. Web Sites.

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