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Interrogations of Cinematic Norms: Avant-Garde Film, History, and Mnemonic Practices

CHRISTOF DECKER

ABSTRACT

This essay examines mnemonic practices of avant-garde films in the United States in the 1960s, a period which was marked by a proliferation of mythopoeic, underground, minimal, and assemblage films, and of mass-mediated images, many of which were to be reassembled in the experimental collage films. By first looking at debates about the 'new documentary,' in particular its claims for a postmodern truth and its engagement with the past, an attempt will be made to position avant-garde film in relation to the two other major filmic discourses: narrative and documentary film. This entails an examination of the technological specificity of the cinematic apparatus and of different modes of production which are engendered technologically and influence aesthetic and narrative properties of the filmic text. An underlying assumption for this contextual approach is the hypothesis that avant-garde film, which often has an adversarial and oppositional relation to narrative closure and to totalizing truth claims of 'historical reference,' has engaged in distinct mnemonic practices aimed at the subversion and destabilization of hegemonic filmic discourses, but also at the creation of poetic and lyrical metaphors of remembering which make use of cinematic signifiers more creatively. Accordingly, a detailed analysis of films by Bruce Conner, Kenneth Anger, and Carolee Schneemann will try to show how anti-linear and non-teleological metaphors of cultural memory are established by the avant-garde.

One of the recent developments of Hollywood cinema has been, in some of its most ambitious projects, an urge to investigate America's history of the past thirty-five years. Most notable were attempts by Oliver Stone and Spike Lee to retell the stories of John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X, but even at the heart of a popular film like *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) there is a biographical narrative centering on a naive hero who manages to endure whatever fate puts upon him. Since many of these films display and implement sophisticated computer technologies to simulate historical 'meetings' between protagonists who in fact never met (such as the handshakes with several presidents in *Forrest Gump*) they have tended to foreground one of the core problems of postmodern historiography: the authenticity of sounds and images from the past and, conversely, the simulation of historical 'evidence.' While these films playfully interact with a past that serves as an imaginary site of collective experience, they participate in a process of delegitimation of the visual and aural traces which supposedly evoke historical events as mnemonic traces. A desire to 'historicize' is undermined, ironically, by the loss of an evidential quality of the archival image, and by a subsequent suspicion over its status.

Thus, recent technological innovations have contributed to an uncertainty about the ways of engaging filmically with the past. What is the relation of film to the events recorded as 'historical' footage? How are images and sounds transformed into generically coded representations? How can film discourse be related to debates about cultural memory and its technological mediation? This essay explores some of the diffi-

culties of trying to engage with history and cultural memory so obvious in the examples from narrative cinema; how they are shared by other filmic practices, and, in particular, how they can be related to the American avant-garde film of the sixties.[1] As is well known, the avant-garde is interrelated and interdependent with Hollywood and documentary film on many levels. But it is generally seen to provide alternative textual systems which stress ruptures and disunity and which thereby recontextualize the tendencies toward closure and linearity in narrative cinema, and the claims to historical truth in documentary. By looking at the way cinematic signifiers are classified as mnemonic traces, and by specifying the different textual strategies used in referring to the past, an attempt can therefore be made to differentiate avant-garde practices from those of documentary and narrative films.

For its conceptual framework, the following analysis draws on the work by David E. James, who characterized cinematic signifiers as elements bearing the traces of an economic, social, and technological context.[2] A certain mode of production is inscribed into the film which will consequently inflect the ways how cinematic signifiers are used in practices of relating to the past; mnemonic strategies are therefore not only shaped by basic metaphorical relations – such as teleological or eschatological models of temporal progression –, but also by the material base of the cinema. The avant-garde, it will be argued, undertakes interrogations of cinematic norms – technological as well as discursive – which contribute to alternative and, ultimately, anti-linear and non-teleological metaphors of cultural memory.

This argument will be developed in four steps; first, I will turn briefly to recent debates about the 'new documentary,' which have focused on the interaction of film and history. Here, technological changes which undermine claims to historical veracity or historical truth have been most forcefully scrutinized. Taking up ideas put forward by Linda Williams, the relation of documentary to history and the legacy of the direct cinema movement will be discussed. This documentary style, shaped by a desire to turn to history in the making and to the cult of immediacy, serves as a point of reference for the second part, in which the interrelations between the avant-garde and Hollywood are elaborated. Films from the margins of film production are always implicitly related to the more dominant stylistic and narrative paradigms of Hollywood cinema, and their engagement with history is overdetermined by technological, economic, and social factors shaped by the commercial film industry.

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[1] The term 'avant-garde film' designates heterogeneous practices which are usually subdivided into a number of classifications (such as trance, mythopoeic, lyrical, structural, or graphic films in P. Adams Sitney's account; poetic, minimal or assemblage strains in James Peterson's recent study; or underground, pure, political, art, or women's film in David E. James's analysis of film in the sixties). It denotes practices that overlap, both with other fields of art production (e.g., painting), and, of course, also with narrative and documentary film, but that nevertheless strive to maintain a critical distance to dominant paradigms of narration and persuasion, and to industrial modes of film production. The term is favored in a number of recent publications although it has its contradictions, some of which will be mentioned below. For the different categorical distinctions, see P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979); James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1994); David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

[2] See James, *Allegories of Cinema* 3-28.

From this film-historical and institutional perspective, the third part will investigate how films establish representations of memory, both by looking at technological differences between photography and film, and by discussing the different conceptual levels of mnemonic practices. Finally, practices of the avant-garde from the sixties, notably films by Bruce Conner, Carolee Schneemann, and Kenneth Anger, will be discussed in detail. Although they vary greatly in their textual strategies, they establish representations of cultural memory which favor non-linearity, reflexivity, and multiple layers of inscriptions. Thus, it can be argued that some of the characteristics, which have recently been debated under the rubric of the 'new documentary' or which have influenced films such as Oliver Stone's *JFK*, can be traced back to the experimental practices of the sixties.

1. History and Film: the New Documentary

After a long period of neglect, the early 1990s have seen a resurgent interest in the theory and practice of documentary film. In the wake of reassessing developments since the 1960s, a revised periodization of documentary film's history has been proposed, which posits a 'postmodern' documentary manifesting itself in the early eighties. An important contribution by Linda Williams attending to a renewed interest in 'reality' on television and in film states that the crisis of representation has led to documentaries which problematize notions of truth and history. Since, as she says, "a 'mirror with a memory' can now only reflect another mirror,"[3] there seems to be a common understanding that truth claims of the genre can only be upheld by displaying a radicalized form of reflexivity.

What is specifically 'postmodern' about these truth claims is, according to Williams, an engagement with the relativity and contingency of the concept of truth and, very often, the foregrounding of the search for this volatile form of 'truth' by the persona of the documentarian. Thus, one could say that questions of agency and authority are embedded in an atmosphere of doubt and failure, in attempts at gaining knowledge, and the simultaneous destabilization of the grounds on which it is generated. Williams, who concentrates primarily on *The Thin Blue Line* (1987) by Errol Morris and *Shoah* (1985) by Claude Lanzmann, makes two suppositions which allow for a historical periodization: first, that some kind of truth "is the always receding goal of documentary film,"[4] and second, that the new filmmakers repudiate the tradition of cinéma vérité, a style of filmmaking emerging in the sixties, more appropriately called 'direct cinema' (to distinguish it from a different approach in France).

However, the notion of a 'postmodern truth,' clinging to universal claims of truth as its receding goal but at the same time abandoning these claims in a move toward contingency and relativity, seems to be a paradox that does not do justice to the fact that these films are still part of a tradition of rhetorical address making assumptions about the world they are representing, and about the way information is gathered and ar-

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[3] Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 46.3 (Spring 1993): 9-21; 10.

[4] Williams 20.

ranged. Some of the films – such as Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) – make it plain that they are not about the relativity of meaning but that they joyfully exploit a certain pose of the documentarian who foregrounds his role as a master in the information game. It seems fair to say, therefore, that they display a multiplicity of meanings but that eventually the authority of textual strategies to communicate, arrange, and hierarchize knowledge is not questioned. Furthermore, and more importantly, the relation of the new documentary to the history of direct cinema, in Williams's account, reduces the films by Leacock, Pennebaker, the Maysles, Pincus, Wiseman and others to the aim of catching 'action on the run' and to a notion of absolute truth.

Both reductions are, as Williams acknowledges briefly, too simple. Although direct cinema had an objectivist undertow in the early stances of observing social reality, of letting things happen uninterruptedly – linking it both to a naive faith in a technologically unaltered surface of appearances and a voyeuristic tendency of waiting for psychological revelations –, Leacock was the first to admit that he did *not* propose anything like an absolute truth by his 'uncontrolling' approach. On the contrary, many of his films are subtle interactions between himself and the individuals he was interested in, even if these encounters were very often quite obviously edited to highlight ironical juxtapositions. Thus, the American direct-cinema movement was characterized by a remarkable breadth of activities, which did not lead to a unified position on claims of historical truth. As Arthur points out, a lack of closure and the simplicity of design in these films were "equated with unbiased access or a 'multiple consciousness of opposing perspectives'"[5] and therefore, in the best examples of direct cinema, in competing versions of 'truth.'

However, Williams points to an important performative strategy at work in Morris's and Lanzmann's films, which opens up a ground for interaction with the past and a particular practice of documentary film to activate memory. She writes that whenever there are moments of personal revelation, they become pivotal moments for the past's 'reverberation with the present': "We thus see the power of the past not simply by dramatizing it, or reenacting it, or talking about it obsessively (though these films do all this), but finally by finding its traces, in repetitions and resistances, in the present."[6] In this sense, film discourse classified as documentary recollects the past by the oral

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[5] Paul Arthur, "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)," *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993) 108-34; 121.

[6] Williams 15. The question of *Shoah*'s interaction with the past is also taken up by Gertrud Koch. In contrast to Williams, Koch stresses Lanzmann's characterization of the film as not pertaining to the realm of memory. Relating the conception of traumatic experience not so much to Freud's notion of an imaginary event, but to Sartre's existentialist notion of an empirical fact, she posits trauma as a fundamental disruption of chronological time, insurmountable both by representation and by historicization. The annihilation of the Jews cannot be remembered, it can only, however imperfectly and indirectly, be re-enacted or re-experienced in the acts of legitimation of those who have survived. According to Koch, Lanzmann emphasizes *le vécu*, that which has been experienced, and not memory, seen as an act of assigning chronology and coherence to a virtual traumatic 'black box.' Traumatic experience enables a 'somatic recurrence' in bodies and gestures, an experiential trace, but not the coherence of memory; see Gertrud Koch, "Die ästhetische Transformation der Vorstellung vom Unvorstellbaren: Claude Lanzmanns Film *Shoah*," *Die Einstellung ist die Einstellung: Visuelle Konstruktionen des Judentums* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1992) 143-69.

testimony of eye-witnesses, by reenacting historical scenes and, similar to psychoanaly-
sis and the involuntary breaking through of memory traces, by 'revelations' of past ex-
perience in present behavior or speech. These 'electrifying moments' are often emo-
tionally the most highly charged ones, and they attest to the importance and legacy of
direct cinema; they are also the most critical for questions of authenticity and posing,
real behavior or artificial play, and they share this importance with a fourth strategy
of interaction with the past, archival footage used as evidence or analogical trace. This
generic context shall provide the background for the following exploration of avant-
garde practices, sometimes overlapping with those of documentary or narrative cin-
ema but often radicalizing and inventing their own repertoire of mnemonic strategies.

2. Interrelations of Industrial and Avant-Garde Cinema

To be able to see that direct cinema and avant-garde practices were, in the early
sixties, seen in close connection, it is worth recalling that Jonas Mekas, trying to pro-
mote his assessment of a 'New American Cinema,' actually characterized Richard
Leacock as a paradigmatic example of liberating tendencies in film production. This
was in 1962, when the idea of an 'uncontrolled cinema,' of freedom of movement and
of watching scenes unobtrusively seemed to be a radical departure from the aesthetics
of ordinary documentaries *and* a liberation of the mode of production.[7] In the com-
mon metaphors of the day, the cinema was now seen to be available for poets and for
'contributions to human experience.' Improvisational qualities but also the aesthetics
of immediacy and directness used for radical political purposes aligned experimental
and documentary cinema in a move to revolutionize film art, both on a moral and an
aesthetic level. In this early evaluation and propagation by Mekas, improvisation and
unpredictability of camera movements were markers of authenticity and sincerity:
"Cinema is groping, cinema is going through its own Actor's Studio period – mum-
bling, stammering, searching."[8]

Implicitly or explicitly, this scheme of liberatory possibilities was pitted against a
number of enemies: Hollywood, the mass media, mass production, industrial methods
of production and narration – all efforts by bureaucracies or corporations to delimit
potentials of creation and self-expression. The avant-garde of the sixties, but also
documentary filmmakers working independently, were demanding and striving toward
autonomy in all fields of filmmaking: production, distribution and, of course, film style
and content. Film art as political and aesthetic liberation, as the implementation of a
new morality (Mekas) were aspirations shared by a number of movements. They gen-
erated an immensely creative atmosphere and a sense of urgency on the part of many
filmmakers, but, as David E. James has argued, they were bound up with contradic-
tions and aporias from the beginning, pertaining to the cinematic apparatus, which
was seen as adversary and ally at the same time.

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[7] See Jonas Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," *Film Culture* 24 (1962): 6-16.
[8] Mekas 10.

Presupposing that the industrial mode of production took on a normative quality in the history of cinema, James contends that alternative practices of film production are always influenced and inflected by the scope, commercialism, and efficiency of Hollywood. Interrogations of cinematic norms can thus only be conceptualized as negotiations with hegemonic conventions of narrative design and institutional structures, which are partly inverted or deconstructed, partly emulated and adapted. The interrelations work both ways, but the process of determination is grounded in an asymmetrical relation of power: Hollywood is seen as an apparatus producing desire and narrative order, despised and loved, ambiguously incorporated and vainly ignored. Any non-industrial film, according to this view, "always finds itself already politicized, already conceptualized as marginal, deviant, inconsequential – as other."[9]

While Hollywood can use traces of the cinematic signifier to 'downgrade' itself, i.e., to emulate stylistic choices of the amateur, alternative cinema will never be able to 'upgrade' itself to match the status of latest technological (and thus economic and institutional) developments; it remains marked by its deficiency. This dialectic, at work in the multiple negotiations with Hollywood (and commercial television), links film style and content to questions of technology, economics, and social practice. Every film thus becomes, as James suggests, a material trace of an intersection of these different fields of determination:

> Even as it encodes its own mode of production, every alternative film practice encodes its position in respect to the dominant mode of production, to the mass media. And the mode of production it manifests speaks of the social relations that constitute it, the social relations of the cinema of which it is, or would be, the film-vehicle. Every film is thus an allegory of a cinema.[10]

However, the negotiations between margin and center, between a dominant narrative and its deconstruction in countercultural parodies, or between a television report and its re-editing and recycling in assemblage films, these negotiations do not follow a clear-cut pattern or a simple logic of 'liberation.' They are just as responsive to changes in society as they are to the possibilities of subversion becoming itself a cliché: "In place of the single, trans-historic, self-regulating avant-garde tradition appears the spectrum of alternative practices which develop and decay with historically specific needs and possibilities."[11] What is interesting about the sixties is that these needs are adjusted and revised on many levels at the same time, so that avant-garde film moves rapidly into many different directions in an outburst of creativity.

Both in terms of production and technology, the model of *personal filmmaking*, of controlling all aspects related to technical processes and of being able to carry out the most important tasks, gains acceptance. While industrial cinema compartmentalizes and rationalizes the steps of production, alternative cinema tries to elevate the status of the amateur in a tactical maneuver that merges filmmaking and personal expression, technician and poet. Stan Brakhage coins the term of an 'untutored vision' as an ideal of the negation of technique and technical convention. In an anticipation of

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[9] James, *Allegories of Cinema* 20.
[10] James, *Allegories of Cinema* 12.
[11] James, *Allegories of Cinema* 22.

critical analyses of perspective in apparatus theories of later years, he renounces the dominance of the conventions of Renaissance perspective – of perceptual norms encoded in the mechanics and speed of the camera, the lens, the filmstock, or the optical apparatus. 'Liberation,' in his writing, refers not only to an emancipation of craftsmanship but also to the deliberate neglect of everything that 'professional' rules prescribe.[12]

While these liberatory impulses resonate in different and contradictory ways in the avant-garde film – the artisanal stance of the individual artist such as Brakhage is met by political collectives, the poetic filmmaker stressing subjectivity finds an antipode in the mechanization and de-personalization of Warhol's early films[13] – some of its hallmarks, e.g., immediacy, proximity and urgency, indicate that the relation to history centers around the view of 'history in the making,' of an interlocked present that foregrounds both presence and the 'here and now' of experience. This temporal dimension, prevalent also in questions of authenticity and artificiality, forecloses looking back to a past that is to be superseded by a 'morality of the new' (Mekas), the stammering and probing of speech and looking that marks a cultural shift toward youth and its self-expression: "Fragmentation and incompleteness, then, emerge as stylistic tokens of commitment to the present and its consequent forging of a new social identity."[14] But as events in the decade become more violent, as political leaders are killed and families are traumatized by the war, this interlocked stare at the present begins to acknowledge its own historicity, and avant-garde film engages more profoundly with mnemonic practices. Intertextual dialogues with mass media and popular culture, investigations of the cinematic signifier, and autobiographical impulses establish forms of remembering that transcend the cult of immediacy and take the multi-layered and mediated nature of film as their point of departure.

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[12] Stressing that the realism of cinema and its apparatus are a human invention and a mechanical myth, Brakhage formulates his 'utopia of innocent vision' in a much quoted passage: "Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception" (Stan Brakhage, "From *Metaphors on Vision*," *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney [New York: New York UP, 1978] 120-28; 120). This notion has generated criticism: "The artist as inspired genius who forcefully rejects an oppressive tradition and transcends petty rules and conventions is one of the most fundamental myths of the avant-garde" (Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos* 4).

[13] Sitney points out that Andy Warhol turned on the American avant-garde itself by deconstructing myths of technological liberation and personal creation: "Warhol made the profligacy of footage the central fact of all of his early films, and he advertised his indifference to direction, photography, and lighting. He simply turned the camera on and walked away" (Sitney, *Visionary Film* 371-72).

[14] Paul Arthur, "Routines of Emancipation: Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties," *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 17-48; 22.

3. (Avant-Garde) Film and Memory

The emphasis on 'history in the making,' which characterizes American direct cinema, evolved, it is important to recall, in the institutional context of television. The myth of an unmediated access to the world and the dramatization of the ordinary are both functions of the medium which, on the one hand, privatizes the experience of the public sphere, i.e., puts an emphasis on the proximity and immediacy of witnessing events as they are unfolding, and, on the other hand, reconstitutes the everyday world of its audience as a field of discovery and commodification. The engagement of film with history in the sixties is thus shaped to a large extent by an uneasy practice of collaboration with, and opposition to, television.

Already, the 'postmodern' fascination with trash and waste of the culture of abundance is taken up in an intertextual practice which re-assembles the debris of the mass media – of television, newspapers, and Hollywood film – in films that engage with this powerful apparatus of image-making. Bruce Conner's assemblage film *A Movie* (1958) is an early example, but even in documentary filmmaking, Emile De Antonio's *Point of Order* (1964) re-edits the television coverage of the Army-McCarthy hearings.[15] Thus, a number of strategies evolve which question, as in De Antonio's case, or affirm, as in the early direct-cinema films, the cult of immediacy and the foreclosure of investigating the historicity of the cinematic/televised sign. By effacing the technological and institutional apparatus, the myth of 'unmediated access' denies its mediating factors and, consequently, the historical reasons for time-preferences such as the real-time and continuous flow of television. The visual and aural exploration of history and the strategies of remembering are therefore dependent on the materiality of the medium and the means of constructing a representation of memory. By first looking at the peculiar characteristics of photography, these different aspects of film and cultural memory shall now be elaborated.

It is important to recognize that photography, film, and television activate diverse and diverging engagements with the present and the past because of their different technological and material qualities, some of which have been analyzed by Roland Barthes. Speaking from a 'realist position,' a position which is both ignorant to semiotic coding and avowedly anachronistic, Barthes argues that in photography the presence of the thing seen is ultimately the presence of reality itself. While discourse combines signs with arbitrary referents, "in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past."[16] But although this might imply an outstanding importance of photography for the preservation of memory, the magical qualities of short-circuiting past and present seem to be severely limited.

The photograph does not participate in the coherent re-ordering of the past, but, according to Barthes, only in the attestation of that which has existed. The power of

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[15] The collage film, however, has a long history which goes back to surrealism in the thirties; see Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) 361-68.

[16] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1982) 76.

the 'umbilical cord' (Barthes) between photograph and gaze, i.e., the emanation of the real, appears at the same time to be frozen in the split-second presence determined by the shutter-speed. Memory as a coherent ordering of that which is no longer is superseded by the assurance of that which has been there. Barthes's analysis, driven by an interest in the phenomenological, affective dimension of photography, isolates the paradox of a semiotic representation which is at the same time the 'thing itself' to account for the hallucinatory potential of photography, or, as he puts it, the notion that it is "a mad image, chafed by reality."[17] Although this potential changes with regard to computer-generated simulacra, it can be extended to include the magical dimension of film, which shares the optical and chemical apparatus of photography.[18]

However, crucial differences arise. The umbilical cord linking the eye to the 'presence of reality in the past' identifies the photograph as a split-second frozen and immobile, retentive and static. The cinema, on the other hand, is in constant flux and movement, evoking a present tense that is restless and protensive. In Barthes's analysis, the photograph is motionless and without future, related, ultimately, to death, while film moves in the constant flow of its images, and thus is related to a sense of life going by. Consequently, film takes on a restlessness which precludes the contemplation of the frozen instant, while photography, in the melancholy of its stasis, evokes the pity of a lost instant of the 'having been.' This sense of loss is, however, counterbalanced by the sense of presence of the material object, the photograph itself – whether this is seen as a representational sign or as an emanation of the referent. The photograph is taken to be the material trace of 'something that has been,' and the materiality of its surface is an important part of its aura.

In film, this presence of the material object is lacking – light is being projected onto a screen which is empty after the viewing – just as the impression of movement is an illusionary effect created by the perceptive apparatus unable to differentiate between still pictures being projected at a certain speed. The cinema is thus characterized by a two-fold illusion: that of life-like movement (created by projecting 24 frames per second) and the presence of something that is absent in its material sense. With regard to history and time, the cinematic images participate in a logic different from that of photography: on the one hand, the protensity of film, the constant (though illusory) movement and flux, generates a feeling of an unfolding present tense that can be related to events in the past and the future; on the other hand, the illusion of presence, the projection of an object that is ephemeral and volatile, erases the material object to be contemplated and fetishized. Furthermore, the lack of formal marks which could specify the temporality of the cinematic signifier presupposes a unique order of memory for the cinema.[19]

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[17] Barthes 115.

[18] See Bill Nichols on changes brought about by cybernetic systems and the computer as a new metaphor of thinking about the self. Linking realism to film and mechanical reproduction, modernism to television and instantaneous broadcasts, and postmodernism to computers and logico-iconic simulation, this teleology implies primarily a loss of materiality and authenticity: "The chip is pure surface, pure simulation of thought. Its material surface *is* its meaning – without history, without depth, without aura, affect or feeling. The copy reproduces the world, the chip simulates it" (Bill Nichols, "The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems," *Screen* 29.1 [Winter 1988]: 22-46; 33).

It is an order in which the protensity of film, the moving forward in time, evokes the sense of a continual present (and a time-bound, ephemeral 'presence'), which imitates the movement of life itself. Since temporal relations are inferred by the parameters of the text, the workings of memory have to be constructed and marked as a different order of time, the past. Once the lights of the projector are turned off, however, the presence of mnemonic traces evaporates, and the materiality of the cinematic signifier is lost – although, as will be seen, avant-garde film often foregrounds reflexively this aspect of *film* being the prime mediating factor of memory. The dialectical interrelation between presence and absence, stasis and flux, retentiveness and protensity, as it reverberates in photography and film, thus centers on time and materiality: arrested light in an object that ascertains the present, light moving and vanishing in time that is structured to represent the workings of memory.[20]

As Turim points out, at the heart of the "practice of cinematic inscription of the past is the substitution of a constructed image of the past for one we take to be an actual one, a memory."[21] But this representation of memory is, from the point of view Barthes advocates, embedded in the ambiguity of photographic/filmic 'madness,' i.e., the coded structure of the signifying system *and* the ontology of the affective quality of its address. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between different levels of the representation of memory, and of the cinema as mnemonic trace.

A first level, one that also forms the basis of James's claim that every film is an allegory of a cinema, concerns the *materiality* of the cinematic signifier. Every film text is made up of fragments and sequences which have a specific status in relation to the mode of production, technology, and film discourse. The cinematic signifier is a mnemonic trace, in a material sense, attesting to a social and economic praxis as it was encoded by the process of production. It is never a neutral or objective account of unmediated reality but carries with it marks of its mediating forces, e.g., most obviously in the visual and aural traces referred to as archival footage.

Secondly, remembering can be seen as a *process*. Each text has certain strategies of generating knowledge which are marked as mnemonic strategies (pertaining to and recollecting the past), i.e., a process of remembering (in the present) related to an event remembered (in the past). In narrative cinema, flashbacks are used to recount earlier events, documentary films employ, among other things, the testimony of eye-

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[19] This semiotic observation is elaborated with regard to temporal patterns of narration by David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985) 74-98.

[20] Television tends to obliterate these aspects of materiality and lack, of an intimate presence to be grasped on the one hand, and the knowledge of an unbridgeable distance on the other hand, in its appropriation of time as real time and as serial time. As the Gulf War demonstrated, this aligns the television apparatus closely with military imperatives and a quick-freezing of history. The simultaneity of globalized forms of communication and teleaction eradicates the time frame necessary to reflect on decisions that are grounded in political judgment, and the speed of information precludes the distancing devices that make remembrance possible. See Paul Virilio, *Krieg und Fernsehen*, trans. Bernd Wilczek (München: Hanser, 1993); and George Gerbner, "Instant History – Image History: Lessons of the Persian Gulf War," *The Velvet Light Trap* 31 (1993): 3-14.

[21] Maureen Turim, *"Reminiscences,* Subjectivities, and Truths," *To Free the Cinema*, ed. James 193-212; 210.

witnesses, and avant-garde films often manipulate the speed of the camera to subjectivize experience.[22]

Thirdly, structural patterns are laid out to generate representations, or *models of memory*. Each text activates strategies of ordering knowledge, i.e., it participates in the creation of a metaphorical model of memory. The classification of knowledge and of agency, of truth claims and of hierarchies of experience are encoded in the formal, narrative, and stylistic systems of the film. Commentary in documentary may contextualize what oral history has provided as 'raw material'; knowledge of flashbacks is hierarchized and integrated into the order of story information and closure; superimpositions as structural devices in avant-garde film can emphasize the simultaneity of perceptions and the prominence of non-linearity. In this sense, the 'untutored vision' that Brakhage advocates must be seen as a representation of experience and memory, not as an end in itself, as Peterson rightly points out: "The viewer, then, sees not innocent vision itself, but a *representation* of innocent vision, which has to be compared to his or her own visual experiences."[23]

Finally, as is implicit in the examples from different genres, the strategies of remembering and the models of memory are shaped by *generic conventions*. As the text belongs to a certain genre, it adheres to specific expectations about knowledge and to certain claims about the meaning of its mnemonic potential and the patterns of its dis/order. This is the level where the metaphors of remembering are competitively postulating different modes of constructing and interpreting history, where the materiality of the cinematic signifier is classified and contextualized.

Narrative cinema, in its American vernacular, favors diegetic qualities of coherence and closure; classical narration, according to Bordwell, emphasizes causality in temporal and spatial configurations, psychologically defined individuals and the notion that full knowledge can be attained.[24] Documentaries foreground rhetorical qualities which generate truth claims about historical events as part of a persuasive argument, while the avant-garde engages with memory in a move toward poetic and reflexive forms of representation. Subjectivity and personalization, the materiality of signs and the fragmentation of experience are avant-garde strategies which postulate a mnemonic practice that is repetitious, anti-linear and often subject to doubt. While narrative and documentary films often rely on teleological and eschatological metaphors of temporal progression, the avant-garde has been influenced by models of animated remembrance or the psychoanalytic notion of re/inscribing a past that is in

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[22] These examples cover only very few strategies of relating filmically to the past; Bordwell analyzes the temporal mutations of plot and story (techniques such as ellipsis, compression, insertion, dilation) in *Narration in the Fiction Film* 74-98; William C. Wees draws up a catalogue of techniques most prevalent in the avant-garde in his book *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992) 3, 4. Among them are: superimpositions, negative images, scratching and painting on film, slow motion, reverse motion, time-lapse photography, single-frame editing, and flicker effects.

[23] Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos* 6.

[24] See Bordwell 156-204.

a state of constant change and subjected to interpretations, as in the figure of the palimpsest.[25]

Some of these approaches shall be looked at more closely in the following section to demonstrate how mnemonic practices – of a critical intertextuality, an ironic deconstruction and a fragmentary form of remembering – take shape in the films of Bruce Conner, Kenneth Anger, and Carolee Schneemann. Conner's assemblage film *Report* (1967) will be related to the assassination of Kennedy as its historical – though thoroughly mass-mediated – point of reference, Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) can be seen as an ironic recycling of archetypal images from American popular culture, and Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967) will be analyzed with reference to autobiographical constructions of the self. All of the films are characterized by an investigation of the materiality of the cinematic signifier, by an interrogation of the ideology of narrative closure (and thus of an emphasis on the ordered nature of memory in Hollywood film and in television reportage), and, finally, by an attempt to evoke ruptures, repetitions and insecurities of mnenomic processes. However, they are still determined by the hegemonic cinematic practices to which they are related, and thus can only be conceptualized as interrogations from the margins spelling out alternative, but not independent, practices.

4. Mnemonic Practices in Films by Conner, Anger, and Schneemann

If 'immediacy' is taken as one of the central tropes of the sixties, then it is not surprising that avant-garde practices revolve around categories most relevant to immediate experience and immediate presence: performance, the body, and sexuality. In an age that questions, but also strives for, authenticity, public rituals take on the meaning of a common though embattled ground, on which history is made in bodily contact. From demonstrations to rock concerts to the display of presidential power, a logic of looking, exhibiting, and sometimes meeting in public spans the different areas of performance. The body turns into an overdetermined site which promises ecstasy and feeling, or destruction and death; and the rituals of gendering it, of tying it to sexual practices and gender roles, become multiplied as consumer items invite differentiation, and alternative practices suggest liberation.

Underground intertextuality interrogates the hegemonic norms of narration and reportage in Hollywood films and television, which have led to a sense of insincerity and artificiality in the mainstream of culture. It takes on mainly two forms. One is directed at narrative structures, acting styles, mise-en-scène and thematic issues, and is characterized by an ambiguity toward Hollywood, oscillating between repulsion and

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[25] These metaphors of remembering are elaborated in Aleida Assmann's analysis "Zur Metaphorik der Erinnerung," *Mnemosyne: Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Dietrich Harth (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1993) 13-35, from which they are adapted here. The notion of memory as a palimpsest is developed with regard to psychoanalysis, Lacan's notion of the gaze, and film, by Mary Ann Doane, "Remembering Women: Psychical and Historical Constructions in Film Theory," *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 1990) 46-63.

admiration, scorn and pleasure. The other form – alternatively called found footage, compilation, or assemblage film – is concerned with materials of the medium, different 'allegories of cinema' encoded in the materiality of the cinematic signifier. It mixes quotes from coherent narratives with fragments which are 'found,' saved from the cutting-room floor, recycled. It scrutinizes images and sounds, and establishes reference to the 'world' as (inter)textually generated.[26]

Bruce Conner's found-footage film on Kennedy's assassination, *Report*, performs a mnemonic practice interrogating traumatic loss, which is disjunctive and reflexive, foregrounding its fabrication and, ultimately, demonstrating its failure at making sense. The title raises expectations about clarity and coherence, modes of journalistic address, and an ordering of information which is, in an ironic inversion of generic coding, refused and shown to be impossible. Kennedy's assassination and, indeed, the whole personae of Kennedy and his wife seem to be so thoroughly created by and contained in representations from the mass media that scrutinizing the footage can lead neither to conclusions nor to the certainty of truth. By misleading generic expectations Conner repeats, for radio and television, what he had done in his compilation film *A Movie* nine years earlier. In both cases, conventions of structure and thematic concern are taken up, but they are immediately re-assembled and deconstructed to reveal their status as representations.

Essentially, *Report* follows a simple logic of reversal and disjunction. The first half of the film (roughly six minutes) is dominated by the live radio broadcast, on the sound track, of the immediate events bracketing the assassination (from the cars turning into Elm Street to the announcement that Kennedy has been declared dead), which is accompanied by an image track stressing either the *absence* of images (blank leader for about three minutes) or compulsory forms of *repetition*.[27] This subjugation of image to sound is reversed in the second half (again, roughly six minutes). Now the sound track goes back to the beginning of Kennedy's visit to Dallas (the arrival at the airport and the preparations for the departure downtown), and the image track engages in a subtle dialogue with what is being said, by assembling footage from television, advertising, newsreels, horror and war films, a bullfight, blank leader, and much more. It satirizes, creates ironic conjunctions and metaphorical relations – all inflected by the knowledge that Kennedy is dead, as it was established in the first part but, of course, as it is not anticipated in the commentary taken from the beginning of Kennedy's visit.[28]

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[26] A collection of essays dedicated to found-footage films was edited by Cecilia Hausheer and Christoph Settele, *Found Footage Film* (Luzern: Viper/Zyklop Verlag, 1992).

[27] Most notable are an Academy countdown-leader counting from ten to three, and the famous sequence of two cars turning into Elm Street, the first with Kennedy and his wife, the second with secret service personnel; a sequence which, at one point, is fragmented into almost a hundred bits of twelve to sixteen frames.

[28] It is important to notice that the sound track is taken from a radio broadcast; some of its dramatic intensity derives from the fact that it is descriptive (recounting what only the reporter can see) and that some of the actual sounds, such as the wailing of sirens, are heard. The different metaphors at work in assemblage films are outlined by James Peterson, "Making Sense of Found Footage," *Found Footage Film*, ed. Hausheer and Settele 55-75.

However, this reversal of chronological order undermines the 'innocence' of the commentator's description of the arrival at the airport. Not only is his admiring description of Jacqueline Kennedy's pink dress overshadowed by the fact (stated at the beginning of the film, but from a later point in the chronology of the events) that one of the reporters, in the turmoil of the situation after the shooting, can identify the cars speeding by only by catching a glimpse of the pink dress of the 'First Lady,' but the commentary also takes on a certain prophetic tone when it muses on the dangers of the president stepping out of the car to greet people lining the street. The reversal of chronological order and the disjunction of sound and image destabilize the evidential quality of aural and visual 'traces' and reassign historicity to a newsreport steeped in the present tense of 'things happening as the reporters speak.' What is recounted in the second part of the film is reframed by the events to come, and indeed by the events that have already happened *in the film*, and it is this tension of temporality which focuses the attention not merely on the fact that Kennedy is dead, but on the collective fantasies projected upon him.

Thus, the film turns on what Kennedy 'stood for,' even if this attests primarily to good looks, harmony, and youth in the popular imagination. Consequently, the metaphorical and ironic juxtapositions between commentary and image track in the second half serve to a large extent as a critique of these popular assumptions and they also, sometimes rather blatantly, satirize the atmosphere of 'innocent' reverence conjured up by the reporter. His exclamation that the "weather couldn't be better" is accompanied by the mushroom cloud of an atomic explosion, or his description of a "bouquet of brilliant red roses," which has been given to Jacqueline Kennedy, is coupled with a television image of the coffin with Kennedy's dead body on which some flowers have been put.[29] But on the whole, the juxtapositions emphasize the gap between the historical event and its representation, the impossibility of imposing an ordered and coherent structure of remembrance on the assassination; the *report* attests to its failure.[30]

In part, this derives from the fact that Kennedy's moment of death cannot be shown; it can only be inferred from the horror and grief it generates in the live reporting or in the immediate reaction of the eye-witness. And it can be evoked metaphorically in the image of a bull being killed by a matador, or, in the first part of the film, in the reflexive figure of blank leader on which, momentarily, the technical terms "FINISH," "HEAD," "PICTURE" summarize what the sound track is about to elaborate. This displacement of meaning, common to assemblage films, is echoed at the end, when "HEAD" and "PICTURE" on blank leader are repeated briefly among pictures of 'Oswald's' gun. It emphasizes the lack of pictures which could function as evidence, i.e., show what happened, but also to the doubts that these pictures, were they avail-

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[29] The underlying principle at work here is a displacement of meaning established by the sound track onto visual sequences from different generic backgrounds. A comic effect is achieved by images which are related semantically to the verbal description but which also serve as an ironic commentary due to their different generic coding.

[30] To some extent, this may be a general characteristic of assemblage films. Peterson points out that although Conner, in his other films, generates coherent connections between shots, "avant-garde compilations, like bricolage animation, may be of the centrifugal type – the point of the interpolation of diverse material is not to construct an internally coherent new whole, but to reappraise the source of the interpolated material" (Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos* 160).

able (and indeed, they are in the Zapruder film), would reveal anything. Ultimately, the experience of Kennedy's traumatic loss is beyond the order of mass-mediated representations.

Thus, Conner can either include found footage which calls up, for purposes of critique or fun, narrative genres such as the horror film, or a slow-motion sequence which shows how a light-bulb is being destroyed by a bullet. Or he can rupture and repeat endlessly images of Kennedy and his wife. Both strategies ultimately demonstrate a mnemonic practice which is compulsively drawn to an event that evades its narrativization. Though the last image, which shows an IBM machine from an old promotional film on which the 'sell button' is pushed just as the motorcade begins to move downtown on the sound track, might imply that Conner is proposing an economic imperative for the assassination, this proposition is not supported by the preceding montage. Rather, the realm of the spoken word (from the news broadcasts) seems to be trapped in a pathological state of 'knowing unknowingness' while the visual footage moves from the acknowledgment of absence (black leader) to ironic juxtapositions and, finally, also to the attempt at visualizing, however briefly, grief.

Conner's collage, taking its footage from various sources and thus referring intertextually to the historical world as mediated text, is free to construct a model of memory radically disjunctive and non-linear, but it is also, in the end, delimited by the very materials it deconstructs. The body of the dead president is lacking; though it can be traced in the public rituals and the mythologies surrounding them, it is gone. In contrast to Oliver Stone's method of scrutinizing the Zapruder footage to prove his case in *JFK*, Conner suggests that 'truth' is not to be found in the audiovisual traces that seemingly animate the dead person but that they, in the immobility of their repetitiousness, primarily attest to its conversion from social actor into myth.[31]

Conner's *Report* creates an ironic tension by reversing chronologies and causalities of Kennedy's visit to Dallas and his assassination. Thus, he engages in mnemonic practices which deconstruct the generic coding of television reportage and restore a sense of historicity to the 'present tense' of radio and television that uncovers mythic dimensions of the persona of the president. Public performance, the ritual of meeting 'the people' in the street, and the constant concerns over the president's body as both a symbol of power and a target for attack are scrutinized in an intertextual practice that refuses the closure of causal sequence or chronological logic. The sense of traumatic loss evoked by the eye-witness accounts is bracketed by the banality of a political spectacle dominated by a façade of harmony and military décor.

Conner's use of intertextual strategies accordingly operates as a critique, which strips away the superficial layers of that façade. Kenneth Anger, on the other hand, al-

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[31] This distinction is taken from a conceptualization by Bill Nichols on the representation of the body in documentary film: "We can regard the body in documentary from three perspectives, each representing a different dimension of our conception of self: (1) the body of the social actor who is agent and subject of historical actions and events, situations and experiences; (2) as the body of a narrative character who is the focus of actions and enigmas, helpers and donors all propelling the narrative toward closure; and (3) as a mythic, ahistorical persona, type, icon, or fetish which serves as the object of both desire and identification" (Bill Nichols, "'Getting to Know You ...': Knowledge, Power, and the Body," *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov [New York: Routledge, 1993] 174-91; 184).

though his intertextual strategies also have a strong critical imperative, tends to concentrate on the ambiguity of the different aspects surrounding the making of public myths and the gratifications these personae may promise. Stressing the interdependency of performance and images of the self, and investing the body, ambiguously, with ideas of liberation and domination, Anger illustrates mnemonic practices that rely on the shock tactics and the occultism of animated remembrance. His film *Scorpio Rising* may serve as a case in point.

It is important to stress that *Scorpio Rising* is *not* a film about remembering a dead person – such as Kennedy in Conner's film – but that, on the contrary, it advocates the *creation* of a mythic figure out of images and objects from popular and consumer culture. Still, the intertextual devices and the endowing with life of certain cult icons – Dean and Brando, Hitler and Jesus – allow for an analysis of underlying models of memory. While Conner relates consciously to the 'mediated past' as the focus of his interest, Anger does so in passing and only in so far as it serves his purpose of creating a mythological universe out of American popular culture.[32]

The film is an experimental narrative divided into four parts, all of which are accompanied and demarcated by popular songs. The first part focuses on motorcycles as they are made ready to go, and on men dressing in black leather with their belts, zips, and jackets put into place. Part two introduces the leader of the gang, Scorpio, whose room is cluttered with images from popular culture, and whose television set shows short sequences from *The Wild One* (Stanley Kramer, 1954) starring Marlon Brando as a motorcycle hero. This room is a virtual catalogue of Scorpio's unconscious, as Sitney aptly calls it,[33] in which many of the symbols and icons are present that are taken up in the course of the following two parts. After having taken a sniff of cocaine, Scorpio takes off to meet other cyclists in part three. In the last part, he changes into a 'political leader,' similar to Jesus and Hitler, who exerts power over his followers. The film ends with a motorcycle race and one of the cyclists presumably dying in a crash.

This steady narrative progression toward a climactic ending is ruptured and destabilized continuously by a sense of ironic doubleness undermining the postures of seriousness *and* playfulness and emphasizing the degree to which the mythopoeic film, which takes its material from Hollywood movies and popular music, is overdetermined by a sense of performative self-creation and artificiality. On the one hand, the film takes its cues from Hollywood narratives of 'rebellion' and a consumer culture which fetishizes objects of mobility, on the other hand, these cultural objects are not tamed by moralizing closures about social behavior but are, on the contrary, coupled with fantasies about unlimited power and sadistic rituals of sacrifice epitomized by Nazi symbols and Hitler.

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[32] Sitney calls *Scorpio Rising* accordingly a mythographic or mythopoeic film: "It self-consciously creates its own myth of the motorcyclist by comparison with other myths: the dead movie star, Dean; the live one, Brando; the savior of men, Christ; the villain of men, Hitler. Each of these myths is evoked in ambiguity, without moralizing. From the photos of Hitler and a Nazi soldier and from the use of swastikas and other Nazi impedimenta, Scorpio derives a Nietzschean ecstasy of will and power" (Sitney, *Visionary Film* 121).

[33] See Sitney's analysis of the film in *Visionary Film* 115-24.

However, both strategies are ultimately eclipsed by the ironies created intertextually and the reverberations caused by joining popular songs with the action shown, resulting in a continuous process of cross-referentiality. Throughout the film, the blasphemous intention of revealing the 'truth' about Jesus Christ is achieved by inter-cutting sequences from a film depicting Jesus and his disciples (*The Road to Jerusalem*) with scenes of the motorcycle gang meeting for a party and the motorcycle race at the end. By upholding the rules of continuity editing, the groups from the different films seem to 'meet' in a common room, and the deconstructive effect is achieved by having Jesus witness the 'Walpurgis party' where the motorcycle gang engage in cross-dressing, homosexual masquerade, and acts of violence.

While these devices primarily serve to legitimize the sub-cultural rituals being shown, these rituals themselves are contextualized ironically by the popular songs that accompany them. In the first part, men putting on their black leather gear are framed by Bobby Vinton's 'she wore blue velvet, softer than satin was the light from the stars,' whereas the wild party is coupled with a song proclaiming 'baby, you're torturing me.' The cross-references that ensue go both ways; a latent content of aggression and 'perversion' is uncovered in the lyrics of songs that are seemingly innocent or sentimental, while the sub-cultural rituals (just as the 'official' rituals of Christian religion) are seen as an immature enactment of dependency or mock rebellion.[34] Thus, the film privileges a stance of ironic deconstruction, which questions not only the dominant ideologies of Christianity and heterosexuality, but ultimately also those of the counter culture, even as critical strategies of re-appropriating hegemonic signs and rituals are performed. Anger engages with the myths created by Hollywood, and his cinema is, as James points out, "available for all the pleasures of nostalgia and fantasy; but his use of Hollywood's stories also turns them reflexively so that they are made to dramatize Hollywood's role in modern society."[35]

Consequently, Anger's construction of mnemonic traces is overdetermined by the visual and aural universe created by Hollywood even as it is drawn toward the aesthetics of evil epitomized by fascism. Scorpio's cult is shaped simultaneously by the images (and the imaginary) of fascism and American popular culture, but both realms take on an ahistorical meaning, a sense of being deprived of historical reference and of serious consideration. This strategy of anti-linear and ahistorical juxtapositions, which posits the shock tactic of surprise and suddenness as a guiding principle for the resurrection of the power represented by the images of the dead, can be seen as a (post)modern form of animated remembrance. In Anger's film, it is attached to and limited by the industries of image-making in the twentieth century. The magical power of creating myths intertextually is destabilized irrevocably by the knowledge that in the age of Hollywood all myths are fabrications – the central trope that persists in the worship of (heathen) Gods is thus the ironic certainty of not-believing.

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[34] These observations, however, are certainly shaped by historical hindsight. *Scorpio Rising* was, just as *Flaming Creatures* (1963) by Jack Smith, censored and banned at the time; thus, the provocational gesture was initially much more important than the subtle reflections on the structural position of the sub-culture vis-à-vis the mainstream.

[35] James, *Allegories of Cinema* 152.

Still, the attempt at not moralizing about structures of fascination and obsession leads to a radical ambivalence which posits the sado-masochistic structure of feeling as a universal, though unacknowledged, force. The body is adored and displayed, but it is also abused and tortured; the symbol of 'scorpio' itself includes mutually exclusive libido and death drives. Thus, *Scorpio Rising* grounds its mnemonic practices in metaphors of simultaneity and ambivalence whose undecidability, at the end of the climactic narrative build-up, is 'solved' by acts of violence and destruction.

Unknowingly, the slow pans and tilts over the motorcycles and men dressing in the first part indicate that this radical ambivalence can be related to the origins of the fetish as it is explained psychoanalytically. Since it is a substitutional object which goes back, just as the disavowal of trauma, to a moment in time prior to the unwanted and uncanny discovery of sexual difference, it is also, as Sigmund Freud has pointed out, caught in a state of undecidability.[36] In some extreme cases the fetish even seems to imply both, the disavowal and the fact of castration. Seen from this perspective, *Scorpio Rising* illustrates not only the fundamental doubts about the fabrications and thus the artificiality of myths, but also a degree of fetishization, which disavows sexual difference and the fear of castration by creating a homosexual universe devoid of women as historical agents.

The confrontational style of shocking juxtapositions in Anger's film is lacking completely in Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses*, which shall serve as the final example of mnemonic strategies in the American avant-garde. In fact, this film belongs to a different sub-genre altogether, i.e., it is the first part of Schneemann's filmed autobiography. This generic coding, which establishes the film as an attempt to give meaning filmically to a part of the filmmaker's life in the past, is indicated at the beginning by the title card reading '*Fuses* by Carolee Schneemann with herself, James Tenney, Kitch the cat, 1967.'[37] The past experience central to the film is a series of intense sexual encounters between Schneemann and Tenney, all of which are radically fragmented, so that no discernible logic connects the glimpses of caressing, kissing, touching, and copulating, except for the different emotional states being evoked by painting on the film, scratching, superimposing and coloring the individual frames.

Contrary to expectations about a coherent autobiographical subject, the film stresses ruptures in self-perception, and thus favors a mnemonic practice that privileges two central notions: the feeling and perceptual quality of *flow* (both in the sense of a steady temporal flow and in the sense of boundaries between bodies merging and fusing) and, on the other hand, the concept of memory as relating to a *structure of experience* which is not linear or chronological but punctuated by the intensity of bodily sensations. Both notions are supported by the disjunction of sound and image which characterizes the film; the sound track is comprised, uninterruptedly, of ocean waves and breakers approaching the shore, i.e., the roaring sea with sea-gulls occasionally

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[36] See his essay on fetishism: "Fetischismus (1927)," *Psychologie des Unbewußten*, Studienausgabe 3, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, and James Strachey (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer 1969-1975) 383-88.

[37] The film was conceived in reaction to a film by Stan Brakhage, in which Schneemann and Tenney had appeared; see Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 142.

calling from a distance, while the images oscillate between different states and bodily expressions of sexual ecstasy – visually intense, but aurally mute.

By refusing autobiographical closure – the expectation that points of view are referred back to a subject that perceives and experiences the world – Schneemann foregrounds the difficulties for a filmic articulation of the self, split irreconcilably as the person behind the camera, i.e., absent in front of it, or present as the object seen but absent as the one seeing. Shifting the views from looking at the nude male body or being looked at as the naked female body, and also including the indifferent third view of a camera looking mechanically at the couple 'making love,' she attests to the cinematic apparatus which inherently multiplies the selves of autobiography: "The other can record the self or the self can record the other and the world, but the self cannot simply capture or control its own filmic articulation."[38] This leads, in accordance with the experiential flow and the timelessness of wave-like body movements, to a notion of togetherness and momentary forms of merging (of selves), which are illustrated by the silhouettes and contours of the bodies overlapping or parting.

Some of the recurring images show a young woman running toward the ocean, approaching the camera or moving away in slow motion, and some impressions are from the inside of a car, but mostly the visual representations of the sexual encounter move in on the bodies themselves, which become the material for the mnemonic traces. Body parts are isolated, the penis, the vagina, breasts – or they are shown in rapid movements and rhythms echoing intensity and desire. Throughout the film, these images and sequences are subjected to processes of superimposition, manipulation of time, painting and scratching on the cinematic signifier, which foreclose pornographic voyeurism and add the imaginative reverberations of color and mood. As the emotions are written into facial features, and body movements come to signify metonymically the irresistibility of sexual passion, these recollections are provided with a further layer of a mnemonic practice – painting on the film, fragmenting and reversing the flow of images – which serves as a commentary and as a reworking of the 'event remembered.'

Memory becomes, in a material sense, the process of "inscription and reinscription" that Doane posits for the metaphor of the palimpsest.[39] Not only are the visual sequences supplemented by emotional shadings of the colors, but they are also, contrary to a belief in their 'evidential' quality, subjected to an intricate play of hiding and revealing body parts in un/identifiable shapes and dark areas of the frame. At times, the body is dispersed in a non-figurative assembly of pulsating shapes which demonstrate the different stages of fusion and separation.

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[38] Turim 194. See also the article by Elizabeth W. Bruss on the differences between literary and film autobiographies. Her conclusion summarizes concisely the fragmentation of selves as seen in *Fuses*: "The cinematic subject cannot, then, precede the cinematic apparatus, meaning that even the most 'personal' film is logically the product of a person whom the film itself creates. . . . But the heterogeneity of the edited image goes even further toward expressing a manufactured subjectivity, an artifact that has no single site, no inherent unity, no body where it is 'naturally' confined" (Elizabeth W. Bruss, "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film," *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney [Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980] 298-320; 319).

[39] See Doane, "Remembering Women."

As a lyrical film which attempts filmically to *perform* metaphors of memory, *Fuses* creates a dense texture which is both "correlative in its visceral energy to the sexual encounter it reproduces (its dalliance with memory) and itself the site of a textural eroticism in which the work (or play) on the body of film renews the congress, coming back to it (its encounter with desire)."[40] But this convergence of visceral energy and textual eroticism, relating to a past experience that is autobiographically, though not coherently, grasped, elucidates the dialetics of presence and absence in that, however strongly the present tense of an experiential trace is evoked, the moments of ecstasy and desire are gone and at a certain remove. While the energy of the encounter seems to be encoded in the materiality of the cinematic signifier, it also becomes clear that, ultimately, *film absorbs life into itself*.[41] The metaphors of memory created by the lyrical film thus also attest to the irretrievable absence of the experience which is performed filmically in the 'here and now' of its projection.

Schneemann's film can most usefully be seen as a mnemonic practice related to the metaphor of the palimpsest. It participates on several levels in a process of inscription and reinscription of the 'traces' pertaining to and evoking the past, but it also reflexively illustrates the materiality of that process. It is repetitious and fragmentary, achronological and moving in a continuous flow. By positing the body as the primary site for affective interaction, it acknowledges that in the course of the sexual encounter boundaries of the self permeate and merge in new constellations; it is in this sense genuinely dialogical. The model of a coherent autobiographical self is abandoned, and the search for meaning is related to the persons and objects which form the material tissue for experience. In sum, the multiplication of subject positions, and the privileging of temporal flow over chronological sequence are Schneemann's strategies for interrogating the notion of a film autobiography – as are, in the realm of conscious mythmaking, Kenneth Anger's emphasis on the sense of ambivalence and his foregrounding of intertextual irony, while Bruce Conner deconstructs, critically, notions of causality and chronology encoded in the generic designation of a 'report.' By disjunctions of sound and image, ironic cross-references between image and sound track, and experimenting with temporal ruptures and textual flow, the different mnemonic strategies employed by avant-garde film support the idea that questions of cultural memory are, ultimately, questions of mediation.

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[40] James, *Allegories of Cinema* 320. James points out that at the time *Fuses* was a difficult film for the avant-garde establishment. Due to its sexual openness and its overlappings with pornography, it was considered an outrage by some commentators, but, more importantly, in its affirmation of heterosexuality it meant a provocation to feminist positions. Schneemann herself points to a critic (Annette Michelson) who voiced her distaste of "diaristic indulgence, hand-touch sensibility, dense gestalt," etc.; see the interview with MacDonald 134-51.

[41] This observation goes back to a reaction to the film which is mentioned by Schneemann: "When I showed *Fuses* in London, Jo Durden-Smith came up out of the audience and said, 'I assume that the relationship in the film is ended'; I felt very put out and bewildered by that and said, 'Yes, why would you say so?' He said, 'I'm a filmmaker also, and film absorbs life into itself.' I've always remembered that" (MacDonald 148, 149).

5. Conclusion

As this brief look at some of the mnemonic strategies of avant-garde film has shown, the ways of engaging with the past, of constructing models of memory and remembering are extremely diverse and manifold. They cannot be subsumed under a logic of liberation or 'untutored vision' but instead most often represent subtle dialogues with textual systems that are either deconstructed and subverted, or that serve as a starting point from which new forms of expression are sought. Conner's and Anger's films belong to the first category, while Schneemann's and the lyrical film in general participates in the second, poetic, strain; both strains shall briefly be summarized.

Lyrical films put an emphasis on stylistic traits as metaphors of consciousness, imagination, and self-expression. They enact subjectivized, personal visions and mnemonic practices in the stylistic and formal mutations of the film: processes of memory are *performed* filmically. Assemblage films and experimental narratives, on the other hand, participate in intertextual constructions of memory that evoke a dialogical imagination. Making use of the mass media and interrogating the culture of images, processes of deconstructing conventions of filmic communication are highlighted by the editing. Thus, conventional causal, logical, and linear narratives are undermined and ironically re-constructed, while certain archetypal images representing a collective past experience are scrutinized intensely.

Due to the way avant-garde and documentary practices were interrelating in the sixties, the resulting instability and relativity of truth claims, which recent writings on the 'new documentary' have emphasized, were already taken up by a number of filmmakers thirty years ago.[42] However, spontaneity, improvisation, and their filmic textualization in an 'aesthetics of immediacy' did not, as Mekas hoped (and Leacock shared this hope in his vision of an 'uncontrolled cinema'), contribute to a 'new morality' or liberation, but, as Warhol knew all along, became manifest as fabrications and strategic re-codings of sign systems. A professionalization of performance has taken place which acknowledges that roles are rehearsed and instrumentalized strategically in sites of semiotic struggle. Consequently, this acknowledgment establishes a growing number of mnemonic practices which turn toward the history of *impersonations of the self*, and which presuppose that this self is determined by its performative strategies.

In a sense, then, some of the radical destabilizations of coherence which were achieved by the avant-garde in the sixties, and the idea that the construction of subjectivity is delimited by the objects and personae from popular and consumer culture,

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[42] One of the important autobiographical filmmakers, Ed Pincus, explains what prompted him and David Neuman in *One Step Away*, a film from 1967, to include a number of written inserts distancing the viewer and showing the narrative dimension of direct cinema: "I thought you were bringing back reality to the people, but then you were manipulating this reality, so you should be upfront about the manipulation, that was part of the 'cult of honesty'. So direct cinema was in a certain way cinéma-vérité. It was the duty of a cinéma-vérité filmmaker to really worry about what truth was. People maybe had different versions of what truth was, but that really was a worry" (Christof Decker, "Interview mit Ed Pincus," *Der amerikanische Dokumentarfilm der 60er Jahre: Direct Cinema und Radical Cinema*, ed. Mo Beyerle and Christine N. Brinckmann [Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1991] 293-302; 300).

have left their mark on both documentary and narrative cinema. Claims about structures of experience, perception, and mediation have gained prominence, and, as this essay has tried to demonstrate, the tradition of avant-garde film has managed to disengage reflections about history and mnemonic practices from the dominant paradigms of narrative closure, historical causality, or moral correctness.