

FILM AS AN ART

The Nature of Art

If poetry is what you can't translate, as Robert Frost once suggested, then "art" is what you can't define. Nevertheless, it's fun to try. Art covers such a wide range of human endeavor that it is almost more an attitude than an activity. Over the years, the boundaries of the meaning of the word have expanded, gradually yet inexorably. Cultural historian Raymond Williams has cited art as one of the "keywords"—one that must be understood in order to comprehend the interrelationships between culture and society. As with "community," "criticism," and "science," for example, the history of the word "art" reveals a wealth of information about how our civilization works. A review of that history will help us to understand how the relatively new art of film fits into the general pattern of art.



The ancients recognized seven activities as arts: History, Poetry, Comedy, Tragedy, Music, Dance, and Astronomy. Each was governed by its own muse, each had its own rules and aims, but all seven were united by a common motivation: they were tools, useful to describe the universe and our place in it. They were methods of understanding the mysteries of existence, and as such, they themselves took on the aura of those mysteries. As a result, they were each aspects of religious activity: The performing arts celebrated the rituals; history recorded the story of the race; astronomy searched the heavens. In each of these seven classical arts we can discover the roots of contemporary cultural and sci-



Chapter
Intro



Nine Muses

entific categories. History, for example, leads not only to the modern social sciences but also to prose narrative (the novel, short stories, and so forth). Astronomy, on the other hand, represents the full range of modern science at the same time as it suggests another aspect of the social sciences in its astrological functions of prediction and interpretation. Under the rubric of poetry, the Greeks and Romans recognized three approaches: Lyric, Dramatic, and Epic. All have yielded modern literary arts.

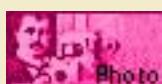
By the thirteenth century, however, the word “art” had taken on a considerably more practical connotation. The Liberal Arts curriculum of the medieval university still numbered seven components, but the method of definition had shifted. The literary arts of the classical period—History, Poetry, Comedy, and Tragedy—had merged into a vaguely defined mix of literature and philosophy and then had been reordered according to analytical principles as Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic (the Trivium), structural elements of the arts rather than qualities of them. Dance was dropped from the list and replaced by Geometry, marking the growing importance of mathematics. Only Music and Astronomy remained unchanged from the ancient categories.

Outside the university cloisters, the word was even more flexible. We still speak of the “art” of war, the medical “arts,” even the “art” of angling. By the sixteenth century, “art” was clearly synonymous with “skill,” and a wheelwright, for example, was just as much an artist as a musician: each practiced a particular skill.



By the late seventeenth century, the range of the word had begun to narrow once again. It was increasingly applied to activities that had never before been included—painting, sculpture, drawing, architecture—what we now call the “Fine Arts.” The rise of the concept of modern science as separate from and contradictory to the arts meant that Astronomy and Geometry were no longer regarded in the same light as Poetry or Music. By the late eighteenth century, the Romantic vision of the artist as specially endowed restored some of the religious aura that had surrounded the word in classical times. A differentiation was now made between “artist” and “artisan.” The former was “creative” or “imaginative,” the latter simply a skilled workman.

In the nineteenth century, as the concept of science developed, the narrowing of the concept of art continued, as if in response to that more rigorously logical activity. What had once been “natural philosophy” was termed “natural



Medieval
Artisans

science"; the art of alchemy became the science of chemistry. The new sciences were precisely defined intellectual activities, dependent on rigorous methods of operation. The arts (which were increasingly seen as being that which science was not) were therefore also more clearly defined.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the word had more or less developed the constellation of connotations we know today. It referred first to the visual, or "Fine," arts, then more generally to literature and the musical arts. It could, on occasion, be stretched to include the performing arts and, although in its broadest sense it still carried the medieval sense of skills, for the most part it was strictly used to refer to more sophisticated endeavors. The romantic sense of the artist as a chosen one remained: "artists" were distinguished not only from "artisans" (craftspeople) but also from "artistes" (performing artists) with lower social and intellectual standing.

With the establishment in the late nineteenth century of the concept of "social sciences," the spectrum of modern intellectual activity was complete and the range of art had narrowed to its present domain. Those phenomena that yielded to study by the scientific method were ordered under the rubric of science and were strictly defined. Other phenomena, less susceptible to laboratory techniques and experimentation, but capable of being ordered with some logic and clarity, were established in the gray area of the social sciences (economics, sociology, politics, psychology, and sometimes even philosophy). Those areas of intellectual endeavor that could not be fit into either the physical or the social sciences were left to the domain of art.



As the development of the social sciences necessarily limited the practical, utilitarian relevance of the arts, and probably in reaction to this phenomenon, theories of estheticism evolved. With roots in the Romantic theory of the artist as prophet and priest, the "art for art's sake" movement of the late Victorian age celebrated form over content and once more changed the focus of the word. The arts were no longer simply approaches to a comprehension of the world; they were now ends in themselves. Walter Pater declared that "all art aspires to the condition of music." Abstraction—pure form—became the touchstone of the work of art and the main criterion by which works of art were judged in the twentieth century.*3

The rush to abstraction accelerated rapidly during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century the avant-garde movement had



Williams's
Keywords

taken the concept of progress from the developing technology and decided that some art must perforce be more “advanced” than other art. The theory of the avant garde, which was a dominating idea in the historical development of the arts from the Romantic period until recently, expressed itself best in terms of abstraction. In this respect the arts were, in effect, mimicking the sciences and technology, searching for the basic elements of their “languages”—the “quanta” of painting or poetry or drama.

The Dada movement of the 1920s parodied this development. The result was the minimalist work of the middle of this century, which marked the endpoint of the struggle of the avant garde toward abstraction: Samuel Beckett’s forty-second dramas (or his ten-page novels), Josef Albers’s color-exercise paintings, John Cage’s silent musical works. Having reduced art to its most basic quanta, the only choice for artists (besides quitting) was to begin over again to rebuild the structures of the arts. This new synthesis began in earnest in the 1960s (although the avant-garde abstractionists had one last card to play: the so-called conceptual art movement of the 1970s, which eliminated the work of art entirely, leaving only the idea behind).

The end of the avant-garde fascination with abstraction came at the same time that political and economic culture was, in parallel, discovering the fallacy of progress and developing in its place a “steady state” theory of existence. From the vantage point of the turn of the twenty-first century, we might say that art made the transition quicker and easier than politics and economics.

The acceleration of abstraction, while it is certainly the main factor in the historical development of the arts during the twentieth century, is not the only one. The force that counters this estheticism is our continuing sense of the political dimension of the arts: that is, both their roots in the community, and their power to explain the structure of society to us.

In Western culture, the power of this relevance (which led the ancients to include History on an equal footing with Music) has certainly not dominated, but it does have a long and honorable history parallel with, if subordinate to, the esthetic impulse toward abstraction. In the 1970s, when the first edition of this book appeared, it seemed safe to assume that as abstraction and reductionism faded away, the political dimension of art—its social nature—would increase in importance. Now, from the perspective of Y2K, it appears that it hasn’t—at least not to the degree we expected. Instead, most of the arts, film



Josef Albers:
square
homage



Cage's
“4:33”



chief among them, have settled down into a period of commercial calm. There is an evident increase in the political and social quotient of most contemporary arts: you can see it in the increasing prevalence of television docudramas and reality-based programming, the mainstream influence of Rap music, and a renewed vigor in independent filmmaking. However, the politics that these arts reflect hasn't progressed much beyond the stage it had reached by 1970: more or less the same issues concern us now as then. "Don't kill the messenger" (and don't blame the artists). And, while the artists have understood and accepted the passing of the avant garde, the politicians haven't yet freed themselves from dependence on the Left–Right dialectic—now equally moribund—upon which that artistic movement depended.

So there is more politics in art—it's just poor quality politics. Moreover, the explosion in the technology of the arts since the mid-1970s, a subject we will discuss in some detail in Chapters 6 and 7, has overshadowed and often displaced the renewed relevance that we expected. This technology is the third basic factor that has determined the history of the arts during the past hundred years.



Originally, the only way to produce art was in "real time": the singer sang the song, the storyteller told the tale, the actors acted the drama. The development in prehistory of drawing and (through pictographs) of writing represented a quantum jump in systems of communication. Images could be stored, stories could be preserved, later to be recalled exactly. For seven thousand years the history of the arts was, essentially, the history of these two representative media: the pictorial and the literary.

The development of recording media, different from representative media in kind as well as degree, was as significant historically as the invention of writing seven thousand years earlier. Photography, film, and sound recording taken together shifted dramatically our historical perspective.

The representational arts made possible the "re-creation" of phenomena, but they required the complex application of the codes and conventions of languages. Moreover, those languages were manipulated by individuals and therefore the element of choice was and is highly significant in the representational

arts. This element is the source of most of the esthetics of the pictorial and literary arts. What interests estheticians is not *what* is said but *how* it is said.

In stark contrast, the recording arts provide a much more direct line of communication between the subject and the observer. They do have their own codes and conventions, it's true: a film or sound recording is not reality, after all. But the language of the recording media is both more direct and less ambiguous than either written or pictorial language. In addition, the history of the recording arts has—until recently—been a direct progression toward greater verisimilitude. Color film reproduces more of reality than does black-and-white; sound film is more closely parallel to actual experience than is silent; and so forth.

This qualitative difference between representational media and recording media is very clear to those who use the latter for scientific purposes. Anthropologists, for example, are well aware of the advantages of film over the written word. Film does not completely eliminate the intervention of a third party between the subject and the observer, but it does significantly reduce the distortion that the presence of an artist inevitably introduces.

The result is a spectrum of the arts that looks like this:



- the performance arts, which happen in real time;
- the representational arts, which depend on the established codes and conventions of language (both pictorial and literary) to convey information about the subject to the observer;
- the recording arts, which provide a more direct path between subject and observer: media not without their own codes but qualitatively more direct than the media of the representational arts.

That is, until now. The application of digital technology to film and audio, which began to gather momentum in the late 1980s, points to a new level of discourse: one that is about to revolutionize our attitude toward the recording arts. Simply put, digital techniques like morphing and sampling destroy our faith in the honesty of the images and sounds we see and hear. The verisimilitude is still there—but we can no longer trust our eyes and ears. We'll discuss these remarkable developments in greater detail in Chapter 7.

Ways of Looking at Art

In order to understand how the recording arts established their place in the spectrum of art, it's necessary first to define some of the basic concepts of that spectrum. There is a wide variety of factors that interrelate to give each of the classical and modern arts its own particular personality, resulting in some elaborate esthetic equations. Two ordering systems, one mainly nineteenth-century in origin, the other more contemporary, suggest themselves immediately.

The Spectrum of Abstraction

The older of these systems of classification depends for its definition on the degree of abstraction of a particular art. This is one of the oldest theories of art, dating back to Aristotle's *Poetics* (fourth century B.C.). According to the Greek philosopher, art was best understood as a type of mimesis, an imitation of reality dependent on a *medium* (through which it was expressed) and a *mode* (the way the medium was utilized). The more mimetic an art is, then, the less abstract it is. In no case, however, is an art completely capable of reproducing reality. A spectrum of the arts organized according to abstraction would look something like this:



Practical	Environmental	Pictorial	Dramatic	Narrative	Musical
design					
	architecture	sculpture			
		painting			
		drawing			
		graphics			
			stage drama		
				novel	
				story	
				nonfiction	
				poetry	
				dance	
				music	

Diagram A

The arts of design (clothing, furniture, eating utensils, and so forth), which often are not even dignified by being included in the artistic spectrum, would be found at the left end of this scale: highly mimetic (a fork comes very close to thoroughly reproducing the idea of a fork) and least abstract. Moving from left to right we find architecture, which often has a very low esthetic quotient, after all; then sculpture, which is both environmental and pictorial; then painting, drawing, and the other graphic arts at the center of the pictorial area of the spectrum.

 The dramatic arts combine pictorial and narrative elements in various measures. The novel, short story, and often nonfiction as well are situated squarely in the narrative range. Then come poetry, which although basically narrative in nature also tends toward the musical end of the spectrum (but sometimes in the other direction, toward the pictorial); dance, combining elements of narrative with music; and finally, at the extreme right of the spectrum, music—the most abstract and “esthetic” of the arts. Remember Walter Pater: “All art aspires to the condition of music.”

 Where do photography and film fit in? Because they are recording arts, they cover essentially the entire range of this classical spectrum. Photography, which is a special case of film (stills rather than movies), naturally situates itself in the pictorial area of the spectrum, but it can also fulfill functions in the practical and environmental areas to the left of that position.

Film covers a broad range, from practical (as a technical invention it is an important scientific tool) through environmental, on through pictorial, dramatic, and narrative to music. Although we know it best as one of the dramatic arts, film is strongly pictorial, which is why films are collected more often in art museums than in libraries; it also has a much stronger narrative element than any of the other dramatic arts, a characteristic recognized by filmmakers ever since D. W. Griffith, who pointed to Charles Dickens as one of his precursors. And because of its clear, organized rhythms—as well as its soundtrack—it has close connections with music. Finally, in its more abstract incarnations, film is strongly environmental as well: as display technologies mature, architects increasingly integrate filmed backgrounds into their more tangible structures.

 This spectrum of abstraction is only one way to organize the artistic experience; it is not in any sense a law. The dramatic area of the spectrum could easily be subsumed under pictorial and narrative; the practical arts can be combined

with the environmental. What is important here is simply to indicate the range of abstraction, from the most mimetic arts to the least mimetic.

(Let's remember that what we are doing here is more art than science. The abstract diagrams and dichotomies here—and throughout the book—should never be thought to carry the weight of law; they are simply ways of seeing, attempts at understanding. If you like these abstractions, please try some of your own; if you don't like them, move on to Chapter 2.)

The Modes of Discourse

The second, more modern way to classify the various arts depends on the relationships among the work, the artist, and the observer. This triangular image of the artistic experience directs our attention away from the work itself, to the medium of communication. The degree of abstraction enters in here, too, but only insofar as it affects the relationship between the artist and the observer. We are interested now not in the quality of the work itself, but in the mode of its transmission.

Organized this way, the system of artistic communication would look something like Diagram B. The vertical axis constitutes the immediate experience of an art; the horizontal, the transmission or narration of it. Artifacts, pictorial representations, and pictorial records (that area above the horizontal axis) occupy space rather than time. Performances, literature, and film records are more concerned with time than with space. (In Diagram A, the space arts occupy the left-hand side of the spectrum, the time arts the right.)

Note that any single art occupies not a point in Diagram B but rather an area. A painting, for example, is both an artifact and a representation. A building is not only an artifact but also partially a representation and occasionally a performance. (Architectural critics often use the language of drama to describe the experience of a building; as we move through it our experience of it takes place in time.) The recording arts, moreover, often use elements of performance and representation.



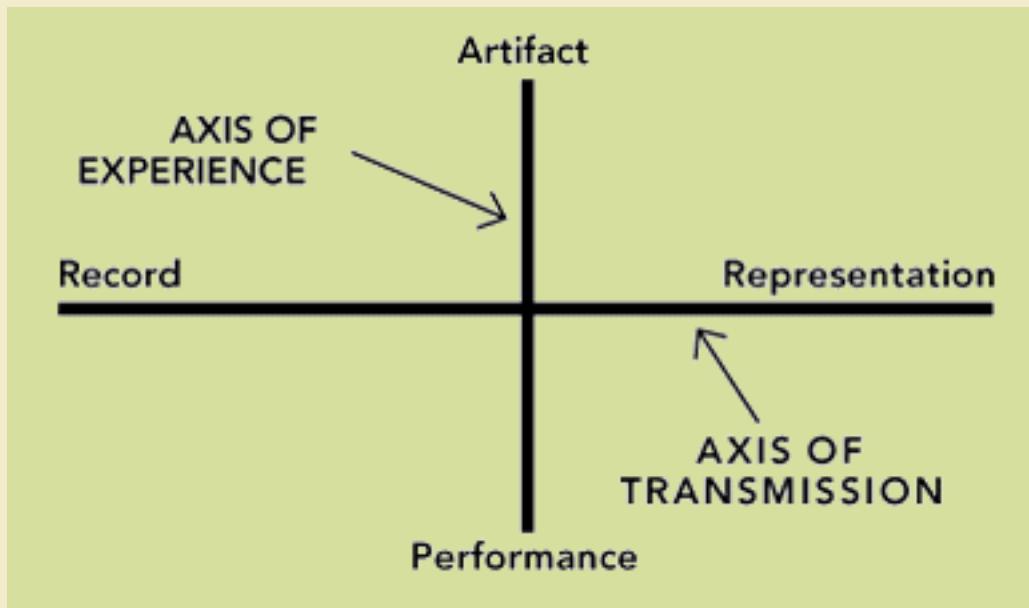


Diagram B

The spectrum in Diagram A gives us an index of the degree of abstraction inherent in an art; in other words, it describes the actual relationship between an art and its subject matter. The graph of Diagram B gives us a simplified picture of the various modes of discourse available to the artist.



The “Rapports de Production”

There is one final aspect of the artistic experience that should be investigated: what the French call “rapports de production” (the relationships of production). How and why does art get produced? How and why is it consumed? Here is the “triangle” of the artistic experience:



Tayler's triangle

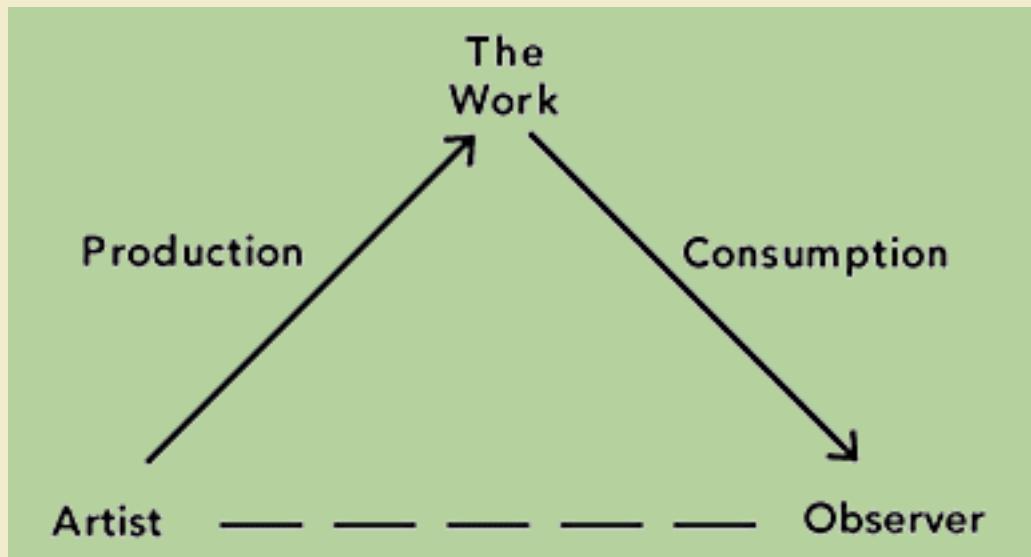


Diagram C

Examination of the relationship between the artist and the work yields theories of the production of art, while analysis of the relationship between the work and the observer gives us theories of its consumption. (The third leg of the triangle, artist–observer, has been until now potential rather than actual, although the heightened interest in interactive means of communication, which began in the early 1980s with the growth of online services, now opens up this relationship to some interesting new possibilities. For the first time, artist and observer have the technology to collaborate.)



Whether we approach the artistic experience from the point of view of production or of consumption, there is a set of determinants that gives a particular shape to the experience. Each of them serves a certain function, and each in turn yields its own general system of criticism. Here is an outline of the determinants, their functions, and the systems of criticism they support:

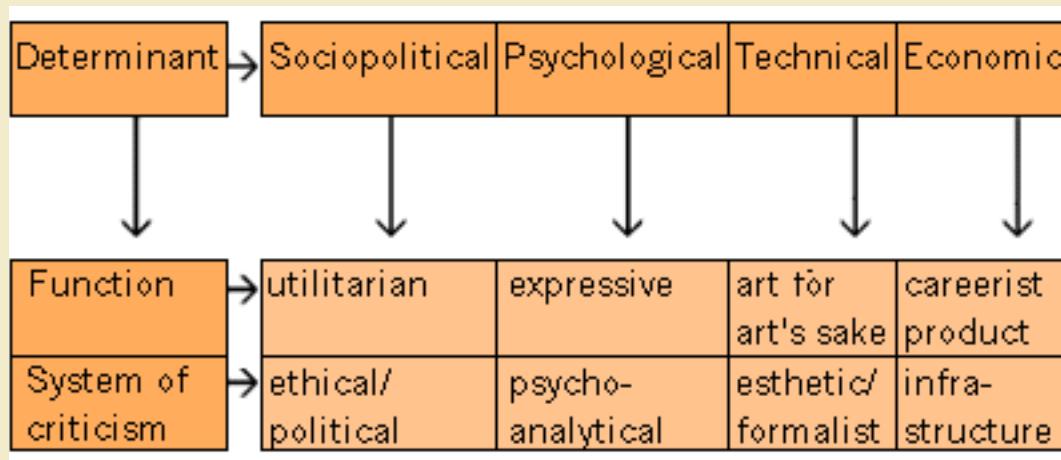


Diagram D

These determinants of the rapports de production function in most human activities, but their operation is especially evident in the arts, since it is there that the economic and political factors that tend to dominate most other activities are more in balance with the psychological and technical factors.

Historically, the political determinant is primary: it is this factor that decides how an art—or work of art—is used socially. Consumption is more important here than production. Greek and Roman theories of art as an epistemological activity fit under this category, especially when the quest for knowledge is seen as quasi-religious. The ritualistic aspect of the arts as celebrations of the community is at the heart of this approach. The political determinant defines the relationship between the work of art and the society that nurtures it.



The psychological determinant, on the other hand, is introspective, focusing our attention not on the relationship between the work and the world at large, but on the connections between the work and the artist, and the work and the observer. The profound psychological effect of a work of art has been recognized ever since Aristotle's theory of catharsis. In the early twentieth century, during the great age of psychoanalysis, most psychological analysis centered on the connection between the artist and the work. The work was seen as an index of the psychological state of its author—sort of a profound and elaborate Rorschach test. Recently, however, psychological attention has shifted to the connection between the work and its consumer, the observer.

The technical determinant governs the language of the art. Given the basic structure of the art—the particular qualities of oil paint, for example, versus tempera or acrylics—what are the limits of the possibilities? How does the translation of an idea into the language of the art affect the idea? What are the thoughtforms of each particular artistic language? How have they shaped the materials the artist utilizes? These questions are the province of the technical determinant. The recording arts, because they are grounded in a much more complex technology than the other arts, are especially susceptible to this kind of analysis. Chapter 2 will discuss these factors in depth. But even seemingly untechnological arts like the novel are deeply influenced by the technical determinant. For example, the novel could not exist in the form we know today without the invention of the printing press.

Finally, all arts are inherently economic products and as such must eventually be considered in economic terms. Again, film and the other recording arts are prime examples of this phenomenon. Like architecture, they are both capital-intensive and labor-intensive; that is, they involve large expenditures of money and they often require large numbers of workers.

These four determinants reveal themselves in new relationships at each stage of the artistic process. The technological and economic determinants form the basis for any art. The language of the art and its techniques exist before the artist decides to use them. Moreover, each art is circumscribed by certain economic realities. Film, because it is a very expensive art, is especially susceptible to the distortions caused by economic considerations. The elaborate economic infrastructure of film—the complex rules of production, distribution, and consumption that underlie the art—set strict limitations on filmmakers, a fact that is often ignored by critics. These economic factors, in turn, are related to certain political and psychological uses to which an art can be put. As an economic commodity, for example, film can often best be understood as selling a service that is essentially psychological in nature: we most often go to movies for the emotional effects they provide.

Artists, confronted with these various determinants, make choices within the set of established possibilities, occasionally breaking new ground, most often reorganizing and recombinining existing factors.



As we move down the other leg of the artistic triangle, the determinants reveal themselves in new relationships. Once the work of art has been completed it has, in a sense, a life of its own. It is, first of all, an economic product to be exploited. This exploitation results in certain psychological effects. The end product, as the influence of the film spreads, is political. No matter how apolitical the work of art may seem, every work has political relevance, like it or not.

Historically, the political and psychological determinants have been recognized as important factors in the artistic experience since classical times. In his *Ars Poetica*, for example, Horace declared that the criteria for a work were that it be both *utile et dulce*, “useful” and “sweet,” or “enjoyable.” The utilitarian value of the work is governed by the political determinant, its enjoyability by the psychological.

Only recently, however, has serious attention been paid to the technical and economic determinants of the work of art. The approach of semiotics is to study the arts and media as languages or language systems—technical structures with inherent laws governing not only *what* is “said” but also *how* it is “said.” Semiotics attempts to describe the codes and structural systems that operate in cultural phenomena. It does this by using a linguistic model; that is, the semiotics of film describes film as a “language.”

Dialectical criticism, on the other hand, studies the arts in their economic context. Pioneered by the Frankfurt school of German philosophers in the 1930s and 1940s—especially Walter Benjamin, T. W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer—dialectical criticism analyzes the direct relationships among the work, the artist, and the observer as they are expressed in terms of economic and political structures. The addition of these two modern approaches to the arts—semiotics and dialectics—gives us a fuller and more precise understanding of the complexities of the artistic experience.

It also allows us more freedom to define its limits. While the image of the artist as priest or prophet reigned, there was no way to disconnect the experience of the work from the production of it. Art depended on artists. But when we recognize the technical and linguistic roots of esthetics, we are more inclined to approach the artistic experience from the point of view of the consumer. In other words, we can liberate ourselves from artist/priests and develop



Horace's
Ars Poetica



a “protestant” theory of art. We have already admitted the practical arts of design into the pantheon. We can go further.

One of the most obvious candidates for admission to the spectrum of the arts is sports. Most sports activities adapt the basic dramatic structure of protagonist/antagonist and can therefore be viewed in dramatic terms. That the “plot” is not preordained simply increases its possibilities and the element of suspense. That the basic “theme” is repeated every time a game is played only reinforces the ritualistic aspects of the drama. Most sports activities share many of the values of dance. Media have not only permitted the recording of sports events for future study and enjoyment but have also significantly decreased the distance between athletes and observers and therefore have heightened our sense of the choreographic aspect of most sports.

Imagine a stranger totally unfamiliar with either dance or basketball being confronted with an example of each. There is no element of either human activity that would insist that we differentiate between them: Michael Jordan is at least the equal of Mikhail Baryshnikov. The difference between these masters’ performances is like the difference between Jazz and Classical music. That sports are “unintentional” (that is, that they are not performed to make a point) simply increases the potential variety of our experience of them.



There are other areas of human endeavor that, like sports, take on new significance when we approach them from the point of view of consumption rather than production—consumables, for example. We experience food and drink (and perfume and possibly other sensual devices) in much the same way that we experience that most esthetic of arts, music. The metaphors we have used to describe the latter (ever since Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* suggested that “music be the food of love”) reinforce this close comparison.

True, the quantity of thought in food or drink is often exceedingly low; it is difficult to make a “statement” in, say, the language of green vegetables. But that is only to note that our senses of taste, smell, and touch are different in kind from our senses of sight and hearing. The element of craft in the creation of food or drink is no less sophisticated ideally than it is in music or drawing. And critics of wine and cooking often use metaphors that would not be out of place if we were to talk about literature or painting.

Let’s turn this around: at least in part, we consume arts like music, film, and literature in the same way that we consume food. Like music, the art of food



Art of
Baseball



Mischa and
Mike



Green
vegetables



Twelfth
Night



Carmine
Coppola
sings

and drink comes close to a purely synesthetic experience. One sign of this is that our normal mode of experience of both differs in kind from the narrative arts. We consume music, like food, regularly and repeatedly. Having heard Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 23 once, having drunk a single bottle of Chassagne-Montrachet, we do not think that we have exhausted their possibilities. We also do not think to censure either the concerto or the wine because we cannot discover "meaning" in it. If the pure esthetic is a valid criterion for art, then consumables should be admitted to the spectrum.

What this theory of the art of food is meant to suggest, of course, is that the function of the observer or consumer in the process of art is every bit as important as the function of the artist/producer. If we do not admit wine or baseball to the spectrum of accepted arts, it is not the fault of the producers of those works, but rather a collective decision by consumers—a decision that can be rescinded.

There is a second corollary: If the sum total of the artistic experience includes the consumer as well as the producer, and if we express it as a product:

PRODUCTION X CONSUMPTION



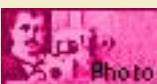
then a novel way of increasing the sum presents itself. Heretofore, when evaluating a work of art, we have concentrated on the production factor. We have judged only the artist's contribution, usually measured against an artificial ideal:

ACHIEVEMENT

REQUIREMENT

a quotient that may have some value in judging other economic activities of a more practical nature (the production of floor waxes or screwdrivers, for example) but that is specious as a system of artistic evaluation, since it depends for its validity on the denominator, an arbitrary "requirement." But we can just as easily increase the experience of art by increasing the factor of consumption, both in quality and in quantity.

In quantitative terms, the more people who are exposed to a work of art, the more potential effect it has. In qualitative terms, the observer/consumer does



Spending Money



Consuming Art

have it within his power to increase the sum value of the work by becoming a more sophisticated, creative, or sensitive participant in the process. This is not a new idea in practice, although it may be so in theory. Indeed, film itself is especially rich in this sort of activity. Film buffs, after all, have trained themselves to discern the thematic, esthetic, even political values inherent in, say, the films of minor directors such as Jacques Tourneur or Archie Mayo. At best, such buffs are the cutting edge of criticism for general students of the subject; at worst, they have discovered a way to extract greater value from poor artistic ore than the rest of us. This is the new ecology of art.

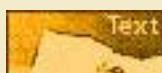
Artists themselves are well aware of the potential of this new, responsive relationship. Found art, found poetry, aleatoric theater, musique concrète, all are based on an understanding of the potential power of the observer to multiply the value of artistic experience. What the artist does in each of these instances is to act as a preobserver, an editor who does not create, but chooses. The poet Denise Levertov has expressed the basis for this enterprise succinctly:

I want to give you
something I've made

some words on a page—as if
to say “Here are some blue beads”

or, “Here's a bright red leaf I found on
the sidewalk” (because

to find is to choose, and choice
is made).... *4



Levertov's
“The Rights”

In eight lines she describes not only the essential artistic drive but also the justification for approaching art not from the point of view of the producer but from that of the consumer: “because to find is to choose, and choice is made.”

This means not only that observers can increase their perception of made art works, but also that they can act: making choices from the dramatic, pictorial, narrative, musical, and environmental materials that present themselves day by day: choice is made. Moreover, there is an ethical aspect to this new artistic equation, for it implies strongly that the observer is the equal of the artist. The word “consumer,” then, is misleading, for the observers are no longer passive but active. They participate fully in the process of art.



Found Art:
Warhol's
Empire

Lindsay:
Poems

The significance of this reappraisal of the roles of artist and observer cannot be underestimated. The most difficult challenge the arts have had to sustain in their seven-thousand-year history has been that posed by the techniques of mass production that grew up with the industrial revolution. While the advantage of mass production has been that it makes art no longer an elite enterprise, it has also meant that artists have had to struggle continuously since the industrial revolution to prevent their work from being turned into a commodity. Only the active participation of the observer at the other end of the process is guarantee against this.

Where once the work of art was judged purely according to arbitrary ideals and artificial requirements, now it can be seen as “semifinished” material, to be *used* by the observer to complete the artistic process rather than simply consumed. The question now is not, “Does this art work meet the standards?” but rather, “How can we use this art work best?” Of course, we are speaking of an ideal here. In reality, most observers of art (whether popular or elite) still passively consume. But the movement toward participatory artistic democracy is growing.

The new technology amplifies this new equality between artist and observer. Now that the observer has the technological power to reshape the artist’s work in numerous ways, the artist would be foolish not to make allowances for the observer’s new-found freedom. Any sophisticated teenager with a Macintosh today can “sample” a favorite CD just as easily as the recording artist who produced it. And most kids who spend more than an hour a day with MTV are aware that there are multiple editions, or “mixes,” for most popular songs, just as they know that movies are released in several versions. The work of art is no longer holy. Rather than producing a finished work, the artist now produces—like it or not—raw materials that we consumers can edit to our liking: “... choice is made.”

The spectrum of abstraction, the modes of discourse, the range of determinants, the equation of producer and consumer (and its corollary, the democratization of the process)—these various approaches to the study of the arts, as we noted earlier, are not meant to carry the weight of scientific law, but simply as aids to an understanding of the artistic experience. As conceptual structures, they are useful, but there is a danger in taking them too seriously. These are

Free funk
samples

ways of thinking. They are not derived inductively; rather, they are deduced from the artistic experience itself, and they are meant to set that experience in its proper context: as a phenomenon that is comparable at the same time as it appears unique. The experience of art comes first; abstract criticism of this sort is—or should be—a secondary activity.

Moreover, none of these conceptual structures exists in isolation. The elements are all in continual flux and their relationships are dialectical. The interest lies not in whether or not, say, architecture is an environmental or pictorial art but in the fact that these elements exist in a dialectical relationship with each other within the art. This is the central struggle that enlivens it. Likewise, it isn't so important whether we classify film as being in the mode of record or representation. (It does evince elements of representation—and of performance and artifact, as well). What counts is that the contrasts between and among these various modes are the source of power for the art of film.

Generally, the spectrum of abstraction describes the relationships of the arts to their raw material in reality; the system of modes of discourse explains something about the ways in which the arts are transmitted from artist to observer; the structure of determinants describes the main factors that define the shape of the arts; and the equation of artist and observer suggests new angles of critical approach to the phenomena of the arts.



Film, Recording, and the Other Arts

The recording arts comprise an entirely new mode of discourse, parallel to those already in existence. Anything that happens in life that can be seen or heard can be recorded on film, tape, or disc. The “art” of film, then, bridges the older arts rather than fitting snugly into the preexisting spectrum. From the beginning, film and photography were neutral: the media existed before the arts. “The cinema is an invention without a future,” Louis Lumière is often quoted as having said. And indeed it might have appeared so in his day. But as this revolutionary mode of discourse was applied, in turn, to each of the older

arts, it took on a life of its own. The earliest film experimenters “did” painting in film, “did” the novel, “did” drama, and so forth, and gradually it became evident which elements of those arts worked in filmic situations and which did not.

In short, the art of film developed by a process of replication. The neutral template of film was laid over the complex systems of the novel, painting, drama, and music to reveal new truths about certain elements of those arts. In fact, if we disregard for the moment the crudity of early recording processes, the majority of the elements of those arts worked very well in film. Indeed, for the past hundred years the history of the arts is tightly bound up with the challenge of film. As the recording arts drew freely from their predecessors, so painting, music, the novel, stage drama—even architecture—had to redefine themselves in terms of the new artistic language of film.

Film, Photography, and Painting

“Moving pictures” are at first glance most closely parallel to the pictorial arts. Until quite recently, film could compete directly with painting only to a limited extent; it wasn’t until the late 1960s that film color was sophisticated enough to be considered more than marginally useful as a tool. Despite this severe limitation, the effects of photography and film were felt almost immediately, for the technological media were clearly seen to surpass painting and drawing in one admittedly limited but nevertheless vital respect: they could record images of the world directly. Certainly, the pictorial arts have other functions besides precise mimesis, but ever since the early Renaissance mimesis had been a primary value in pictorial esthetics. To people for whom travel was a difficult and risky business, the reproduction of landscape scenes was fascinating and the portrait an almost mystical experience. Inundated now by myriad snapshots, mug shots, newspaper photos, and picture postcards, we tend to downplay this function of the pictorial arts.

Very soon after the invention of a viable means of recording a photographic image was announced to the world on January 7, 1839, in a lecture by François Arago to the French Academy of Sciences, the portrait became its chief area of



Baudelaire
on
Photography



Shew
Daguerrotype

exploitation. The daguerreotype allowed thousands of ordinary people to achieve the kind of immortality that had hitherto been reserved to an elite. The democratization of the image had begun. Within a few years, thousands of portrait galleries had come into being.

But Louis Daguerre's invention was incomplete; it produced an image, but it could not reproduce itself. Only a month after the announcement of Daguerre's unique system, William Henry Fox Talbot described how an image could be reproduced by recording a negative photographic image in the camera and using that to produce, in turn, multiple positives. This was the second important element of the art of photography. When Frederick Scott Archer's collodion process replaced Talbot's rough paper negatives with film, the system of photography, which can both capture images and reproduce them infinitely and precisely, was complete.

Naturally, the new invention of photography was immediately applied to the task where it was most useful: the production of portraits. Painting responded in kind. The years of development and maturation of photography, roughly the 1840s to the 1870s, are just those years in which the theory of painting was quickly developing away from mimesis and toward a more sophisticated expression. Freed by the invention of photography from the duty to imitate reality, painters were able to explore more fully the structure of their art. There is certainly no simple cause-and-effect relationship between the invention of photography and these developments in the history of painting. Joseph Turner, for example, was producing "antiphotographic" landscapes thirty years before Daguerre perfected his invention. But their connection is more than coincidental.



More directly, the very quality of the photographic image seems to have had a direct effect on the thinking of painters like the Impressionists (Monet and Auguste Renoir, in particular), who worked to capture the immediate and seemingly accidental quality of the mechanically derived image. In moving away from the idea of a painting as an idealization and toward immediate scientific realism, the Impressionists produced images that must be understood as logically connected with photography. Because the camera now existed, painters were motivated to rediscover the immediacy of the moment and the peculiar quality of light, two factors that loom large in the esthetic formula of still photography. When Monet put a number of these moments side by side, as in



Talbottype

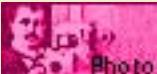
Turner
LandscapeMonet
flipbook

his series of paintings of cathedrals and haystacks at different times of the day, he took the next logical step: his painterly “flip-books” are intriguing precursors of the movies.

Still photographers themselves in the mid-nineteenth century also seem on occasion to be looking toward motion—the time element—as the fulfillment of their art. Not long after the portrait and the landscape had established the documentary value of photographs, experimenters like Oscar G. Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson in England merged the two forms by staging elaborate tableaux not unlike those common in the popular theaters of the day. They used actors and often achieved their effects by painstakingly piecing together collages of negatives. Certainly these photographic dramas are a response to painters’ ideas first (they are strongly reminiscent of pre-Raphaelite work), but with the benefit of hindsight we can discern in Rejlander’s and Robinson’s elaborate images the roots of the dramatic element that was to become paramount once pictures began to move. If Rejlander and Robinson were sentimental pre-Raphaelites, so, too, was D. W. Griffith.

There are many instances of these subtle interrelationships between the developing technology of photography and the established arts of painting and drawing in the nineteenth century, and the next major development in the esthetics of painting, in the early twentieth century, corresponded with the rise of the moving picture. Again, there is no way we can make a precise correlation. It’s not as if Marcel Duchamp went to see a showing of *The Great Train Robbery*, cried, “Aha!” and next day sat down to paint *Nude Descending a Staircase*. But again, the coincidences cannot be ignored.

From one perspective, the movements of Cubism and Futurism can be seen as direct reactions to the increasing primacy of the photographic image. It’s as if artists were saying: since photography does these things so well, we shall turn our attention elsewhere. Cubist painting deliberately eschewed atmosphere and light (the areas in which the Impressionists competed directly—and successfully—with the rising photographers) in order to break radically and irrevocably with the mimetic tradition of Western painting. Cubism marked a significant turning point in the history of all the arts; the artist was freed from a dependence on the existing patterns of the real world and could turn attention to the concept of a work of art that was, for the first time, separate from its subject.



Robinson's
tableau



Nude
Descending

Bergman's
PersonaBergman's
PersonaWhipple
photo 1855O'Sullivan
landscape

Keats's Ode

A Grecian
Urn

From another perspective, Cubism was moving parallel with the development of film. In trying to capture multiple planes of perspective on canvas, Picasso, Braque, and others were responding directly to the challenge of film that, because it was a *moving* picture, permitted—even encouraged—complex, ever-changing perspectives. In this sense, *Nude Descending a Staircase* is an attempt to freeze the multiple perspectives of the movies on canvas. Traditional art history claims that the most important influence on Cubism was African sculpture and this is no doubt true, since the Cubists were probably more familiar with those sculptures than with the films of Edwin S. Porter or Georges Méliès, but structurally the relationship with film is intriguing.

One of the important elements of Cubism, for example, was the attempt to achieve on canvas a sense of the interrelationships among perspectives. This doesn't have its source in African sculpture, but it is very much like the dialectic of montage—editing—in film. Both Cubism and montage eschew the unique point of view and explore the possibilities of multiple perspective.

The theoretical relationship between painting and film continues to this day. The Italian Futurist movement produced obvious parodies of the motion picture; contemporary photographic hyperrealism continues to comment on the ramifications of the camera esthetic. But the connection between the two arts has never again been as sharp and clear as it was during the Cubist period. The primary response of painting to the challenge of film has been the conceptualism that Cubism first liberated and that is now common to all the arts. The work of mimesis has been left, in the main, to the recording arts. The arts of representation and artifact have moved on to a new, more abstract sphere. The strong challenge film presented to the pictorial arts was certainly a function of its mimetic capabilities, but it was also due to the one factor that made film radically different from painting: film moved.

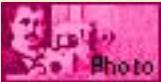


In 1819, John Keats had celebrated the pictorial art's mystical ability to freeze time in an instant in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time...
Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter...

Ah, happy, happy, boughs! that cannot shed

Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu
 And, happy melodist, unwearied,
 For ever piping songs for ever new;
 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
 For ever panting, and for ever young...


 Muybridge sequence


 Muybridge in motion


 A Funny Thing Happened ...

There is something magical and intoxicating about the frozen moment of a still work of art that captures life in full flight. But there is an instructive irony in Keats's poem, for it is almost certain that the sort of urn he was hymning had friezelike illustrations, and friezes are among the major attempts of the still pictorial arts to tell a story, to narrate events—to exist, in short, in time as well as space.

In this sense, movies simply fulfill the destiny of painting. Richard Lester made this point nicely in the end credits of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1966. The film, based on a musical, based on a play by Plautus (thus the classical connection), ends with a shot of Buster Keaton as Erronius running confidently once again around the Seven Hills of Rome. The image gradually turns into an animated frieze against which the credits are projected. The ultimate freeze-frame ending! Keats's happy boughs, happy piper, and happy, happy lovers likewise in their original incarnation on the surface of the urn would move if they could.



Film and the Novel


 Pearlstein Portrait

The narrative potential of film is so marked that it has developed its strongest bond not with painting, not even with drama, but with the novel. Both films and novels tell long stories with a wealth of detail and they do it from the perspective of a narrator, who often interposes a resonant level of irony between the story and the observer. Whatever can be told in print in a novel can be roughly pictured or told in film (although the wildest fantasies of a Jorge Luis Borges or a Lewis Carroll might require a lot of special effects). The differences between the two arts, besides the obvious and powerful difference between pictorial narration and linguistic narration, are quickly apparent.

First, because film operates in real time, it is more limited. Novels end only when they feel like it. Film is, in general, restricted to what Shakespeare called “the short two hours’ traffic of our stage.” Popular novels have been a vast reservoir of material for commercial films over the years. In fact, the economics of the popular novel are such now that recycling the material as a film is a prime consideration for most publishers. It almost seems, at times, as if the popular novel (as opposed to elite prose art) exists only as a first draft trial for the film.

But commercial film still can’t reproduce the range of the novel in time. An average screenplay, for example, is 125 to 150 typescript pages in length; the average novel three times that. Almost invariably, details of incident are lost in the transition from book to film. Only the television serial can overcome this deficiency. It carries with it some of the same sense of duration necessary to the large novel. Of all the screen versions of *War and Peace*, for example, the most successful seems to me to have been the BBC’s twenty-part serialization of the early 1970s; not necessarily because the acting or direction was better than the two- or six-hour film versions (although that is arguable), but because only the longform television serial could reproduce the essential condition of the saga—duration.

At the same time as film is limited to a shorter narration, however, it naturally has pictorial possibilities the novel doesn’t have. What can’t be transferred by incident might be translated into image. And here we come to the most essential difference between the two forms of narration.

Novels are told by the author. We see and hear only what he wants us to see and hear. Films are more or less told by their authors, too, but we see and hear a great deal more than a director necessarily intends. It would be an absurd task for a novelist to try to describe a scene in as much detail as it is conveyed in cinema. (The contemporary novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet has experimented in just this way in novels like *Jealousy* and *In the Labyrinth*.) More important, whatever the novelist describes is filtered through his language, his prejudices, and his point of view. With film we have a certain amount of freedom to choose, to select one detail rather than another.

The driving tension of the novel is the relationship between the materials of the story (plot, character, setting, theme, and so forth) and the narration of it in language; between the tale and the teller, in other words. The driving tension of film, on the other hand, is between the materials of the story and the objec-



tive nature of the image. It's as if the author/director of a film were in continual conflict with the scene he is shooting. Chance plays a much larger part, and the end result is that the observer is free to participate in the experience much more actively. The words on the page are always the same, but the image on the screen changes continually as we redirect our attention. Film is, in this way, a much richer experience.

But it is poorer, as well, since the persona of the narrator is so much weaker. There has only been one major film, for example, that tried to duplicate the first-person narration so useful to the novel, Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1946). The result was a cramped, claustrophobic experience: we saw only what the hero saw. In order to show us the hero, Montgomery had to resort to a battery of mirror tricks. Film can approximate the ironies that the novel develops in narration, but it can never duplicate them.

Naturally, then, the novel responded to the challenge of film by expanded attention to just this area: the subtle, complex ironies of narration. Like painting, prose narrative has in the twentieth century turned away from mimesis and toward self-consciousness. In the process it has bifurcated. What was once in the nineteenth century a unified experience, the main form of social and cultural expression, and the chosen art of the newly literate middle classes, has in the twentieth century divided into two forms: the popular novel (James Michener, Stephen King, Danielle Steele, et al.), which is now so closely connected with film that it sometimes begins life as a screenplay; and the elite novel (Donald Barthelme, Frederick Busch, Milan Kundera), where the "artistic" avant-garde work is being done.

This high art novel, since James Joyce, has developed along lines parallel to painting. Like painters, novelists learned from the experience of film to analyze their art and conceptualize it. Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Donald Barthelme, and many others wrote novels about writing novels (as well as other things) just as many twentieth-century painters painted paintings about painting paintings. Abstraction progressed from a focus on human experience, to a concern for ideas about that experience, finally to an interest mainly in the esthetics of thought. Jean Genet, playwright and novelist, said: "Ideas don't interest me so much as the shape of ideas."

In what other respects has the novel been changed by film? Since the days of Defoe, one of the primary functions of the novel, as of painting, was to com-



Lady in the
Lake



Busch's Style



Joyce's
Ulysses



municate a sense of other places and people. By the time of Sir Walter Scott, this travelogue service had reached its zenith. After that, as first still, then motion picture photography began to perform this function, the scenic and descriptive character of the novel declined. Moreover, novelists have learned to narrate their stories in the smaller units common to film. Like contemporary playwrights, they think now more often in short scenes than in longer acts.

Finally, one of the novel's greatest assets is its ability to manipulate words. Films have words, too, of course, but not usually in such profusion and never with the concrete insistence of the printed page. If painting under the influence of film has tended toward design, then the novel is approaching poetry as it redoubles its attention to itself and celebrates its material: language.

Film and Theater

On the surface, theatrical film seems most closely comparable to stage drama. Certainly the roots of the commercial film in the early years of this century lie there. But film differs from stage drama in several significant respects: it has the vivid, precise visual potential of the pictorial arts; and it has a much greater narrative capability.



The most salient difference between staged drama and filmed drama, as it is between prose narrative and film narrative, is in point of view. We watch a play as we will; we see a film only as the filmmaker wants us to see it. And in film we also have the potential to see a great deal more. It has become a truism that a stage actor acts with his voice, while a film actor uses his face. Even in the most intimate situation, an audience for a stage play (note the word we use—"audience," listeners—not spectators) has difficulty comprehending all but the broadest gestures. Meanwhile, a film actor, thanks to dubbing, doesn't even require a voice of his own; dialogue can be added later. But the face must be extraordinarily expressive, especially when it is magnified as much as a thousand times in closeups. A film actor will often consider a day well spent if he's accomplished one good "look." When we consider in addition that films can be made with "raw material"—nonprofessional actors, even people who aren't aware they're being filmed—the contrasts between stage acting and film acting appear even greater.



Barthelme
Anatomy



Daedalus on
Art



Wayne's look



Bacall's voice

Just as important as the difference in acting styles is the contrast between dramatic narration in film and on stage. In Shakespeare's time, the unit of construction for stagework was the scene rather than the act. A play consisted of twenty or thirty scenes rather than three to five much longer acts. By the nineteenth century, this had changed. As theater moved from the thrust stage to the proscenium arch, and as realism became an important force, the longer, more verisimilitudinous unit of the act took precedence. During a half-hour act, audiences could suspend their disbelief and enter into the lives of the characters; the shorter unit of the scene made this more difficult.

Film grew up just at the time this sort of stage realism was at its height. And just as painting and the novel had relinquished the function of mimesis to film, so did the stage. The scene returned as the basic unit of construction. Strindberg and others developed an expressionistic (at times almost Cubist) use of the stage space. Pirandello analyzed the structure of stage art in detail, and in the process abstracted the experience of the stage for a generation of future playwrights.

By the late twenties, avant-garde theater was in a position to challenge the upstart film seriously. There was no point in realistic stage sets after the style of David Belasco when film could show real locations; no sense in subtlety of gesture when it couldn't be seen past the first row, and audiences could go around the corner to see silent actresses like Gish and Garbo do extraordinary and wonderful things with their faces without seeming to move a muscle. When sound and dialogue joined the image on the screen, film was even more closely comparable to stage drama.

But theater has one advantage over film, and it is a great one: theater is live. If it is true that film can accomplish a great many effects unknown in the theater simply because it is shot discontinuously, it is also true that the people who perform in film are, quite obviously, not in contact with their audience.

In their own ways, two very different theorists of theater made use of this incontrovertible fact. In the late twenties and thirties, both Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud (still the most influential theorists of drama in the modern period) developed concepts of theater that depended on the continuing interaction between audience and cast. Artaud's so-called Theater of Cruelty required a more demanding and intimate relationship between performer and



Gish's look

observer than had ever before existed in the theater. Artaud's aim was to involve the audience deeply in a direct way, as they never could be in the cinema.

In his manifesto *The Theatre and Its Double* Artaud wrote:

We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of the action. A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle [p. 93f].

Artaud conceived a kind of frontal assault on the spectator, a “total” theater in which all the forces of expression would be brought to bear. He redefined the language of the theater as consisting

of everything that occupies the stage, everything that can be manifested and expressed materially on a stage and that is addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed primarily to the mind as is the language of words... such as music, dance, plastic art, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, intonation, architecture, lighting, and scenery [pp. 38–39].



We can see here that the new language of the stage as conceived by Artaud is influenced by the language of film, even as it counters the rising dominance of the new art. Film, because it had no set rules, no traditions, no academicians, had logically and quickly discovered the value of each of the components Artaud suggests: plastic art, music, dance, pantomime, et cetera. Once again, one of the older arts finds itself in a love–hate relationship with the new technology. But Artaud never lost sight of his one significant advantage:

theater is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice [p. 75].

Brecht took the opposite tack. His theory of Epic Theater is more complex—and some would say more sophisticated—than Artaud's Theater of Cruelty. Recognizing the same basic value as Artaud—the immediacy and intimacy of the theatrical performance—Brecht thought to recreate the relationship between actor and audience as a dialectic. No longer would the audience willingly suspend disbelief. That is so much easier in a movie theater.

Epic Theater, Brecht wrote,



turns the spectator into an observer, but arouses his capacity for action, forces him to take decisions.... [In the old, dramatic theater] the spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience, the human being is taken for granted, he is unalterable, [while in the new, Epic Theater] the spectator stands outside, studies; the human being is the object of the inquiry, he is alterable and able to alter.... [*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 37].

All this is accomplished by a device Brecht labeled the Estrangement Effect (die Verfremdungseffekt), whose object, in Brecht's words, was to "alienate the social gest underlying every incident. By social gest is meant the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people" [p. 139]. This is clearly more than just a theory of drama. Brecht's Epic Theater and its Verfremdungseffekt can be applied to a wide range of arts, not least of which is film itself. And, indeed, Brecht's ideas have a major place in the development of film theory.

What Brecht did for the theater was to heighten the spectator's participation, but in an intellectual way, whereas Artaud had specifically rejected intellectual approaches in favor of theater as "a means of inducing trances." Both theories, however, were distinctly antimimetic.

Because of their structural similarities, theater and film interact more often than do other arts. If in France it is true that many of the more celebrated twentieth-century novelists were filmmakers (Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras), in England, Italy, Germany, and the U.S. (to a lesser extent) people who work in film are more likely to split their careers between screen and stage. The stage (together with dance) is the only art that regularly uses film per se within its own context. The relationship has been fruitful. As the theories of Brecht and Artaud have matured over the past forty years, the theater has developed along the lines they forecast; no radically new theories of theater have superseded them. From Artaud's work, contemporary theater gets its renewed interest in the ritual aspect of the dramatic experience and the sense of communal celebration that has always been basic to theater.

Much of this is accomplished by the intense emphasis of contemporary dramatic theater on *mise-en-scène* as opposed to text. On the other hand, contemporary theater also looks toward the spoken word as a source of energy. British playwrights especially developed the concept of theater as conversation that has roots in Brecht. Harold Pinter, John Osborne, Edward Bond, and Tom Stoppard

Münch on
Brecht

Pinter sketch

pard, among others, have created in the past forty years a theater of verbal performance that succeeded on an intimate stage as it never could have on film.

The close parallelism between the forms of theater and feature film could very well have meant disaster for the older art. Arts have “died” before: in the seventeenth century, the narrative or epic poem was superannuated by the invention of the novel, for example. But theater has responded to the challenge of film with a new vitality, and the interaction between the two forms of art has proved to be a major source of creative energy in the mid-twentieth century.

Film and Music

Film’s relationship with music is altogether more complex. Until the development of the recording arts, music held a unique position in the community of arts. It was the only art in which time played a central role. Novels and theater exist in time, it is true, but the observer controls the “time” of a novel and, as important as rhythms are in the performing arts, they are not strictly controlled. A playwright or director can indicate pauses, but these are generally speaking only the crudest of time signatures. Music, the most abstract of arts, demands precise control of time and depends on it.



If melody is the narrative facet of music, and rhythm the unique, temporal element, then harmony may be the synthesis of the two. Our system of musical notation indicates this relationship. Three notes read from left to right form a melody. When they are set in the framework of a time signature, rhythms are overlaid on the melody. When we rearrange them vertically, however, harmony is the result.

Painting can set up harmonies and counterpoint both within a picture and between pictures, but there is no time element. Drama occasionally experiments with counterpoint—Eugène Ionesco’s doubled dialogues are a good example—but only for minor effects. Music, however, makes a lot of interesting art out of the relationship between “horizontal” lines of melody, set in rhythms, and “vertical” sets of harmonies.

(No, I’m not sure how to fit Rap, or Hip-Hop, into this equation. While Rap grows out of a centuries-old and fertile tradition of spoken rhythmic art, and while it was probably the most innovative artform of the 1990s, its eschewal of both melody and harmony suggests that it is “music” only because it is distrib-

uted on CDs and appears on MTV. Maybe Rap makes the point that the one essential element of music is rhythm. Perhaps we should consider Rap, at least in one sense, as the last gasp of abstraction—ironically, the only truly popular expression of the avant-garde abstractionist tendency. Or maybe it's enough to think of Rap as the musicalization of poetry: “All art aspires to the condition of music”—and to its market.)

Abstractly, film offers the same possibilities of rhythm, melody, and harmony as music. The mechanical nature of the film medium allows strict control of the time line: narrative “melodies” can now be controlled precisely. In the frame, events and images can be counterpoised harmonically. Filmmakers began experimenting with the musical potential of the new art very early on. Ever since René Clair’s *Entr’acte* (1924) and Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique* (1924–25), in fact, abstract or “avant-garde” film has depended on musical theory for much of its effect. Even before sound, filmmakers had begun to work closely with musicians. Hans Richter’s *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*, 1928) had a score by Hindemith, played live. Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin—Symphony of a City* (1927) had a live symphonic score as well.



Music had quickly become an integral part of the film experience; silent films were normally “performed” with live music. Moreover, the innovative filmmakers of the silent period were already discovering the musical potential of the image itself. By the late 1930s Sergei Eisenstein, for his film *Alexander Nevsky*, constructed an elaborate scheme to correlate the visual images with the score by the noted composer Prokofiev. In this film as in a number of others, such as Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), music often leads, determining images.

Because film is projected normally at a rate of twenty-four frames per second, the filmmaker has even more precise control over rhythms than the musician. The shortest semihemidemiquaver that could be written in the Western system of notation would last $1/32$ of a second—but it would be impossible to play live notes at that rate. The $1/24$ of a second unit, which is the lowest common denominator of film, effectively exceeds the quickest rhythms of performed Western music. The most sophisticated rhythms in music, the Indian talas, approach the basic unit of film rhythm as an upper limit.

We are ignoring, of course, music that is produced mechanically or electronically. Even before systems of sound recording had matured, the player piano



Léger
“Filmstrips”



Score: 2001



Indian Tal

offered an opportunity to musicians to experiment with rhythmic systems that were impossible for humans to perform. Conlon Nancarrow's "Studies for Player Piano" (the earliest dating from 1948) were interesting explorations of these possibilities.

Film thus utilizes a set of musical concepts expressed in visual terms: melody, harmony, and rhythm are long-established values in film art. Although film itself has had a strong economic impact on music, providing a major market for musicians, it has had no particularly strong *esthetic* effect on music. The techniques of sound recording, however, have revolutionized the older art. The influence of the new technology was felt in two waves.

The invention of the phonograph in 1877 radically altered the dissemination of music. No longer was it necessary to attend a performance, a privilege that was, over the centuries, limited to a very small elite. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, written as bedtime music for a single wealthy individual, Count Kaiserling, former Russian ambassador at the court of the Elector of Saxony, to be played by his personal harpsichordist, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, were now accessible to millions of people who couldn't afford private musicians on twenty-four-hour call.

Recordings and, later, radio broadcasts quickly became powerful pervasive media for the dissemination of music, parallel with performance but superseding it. This had just as profound an effect on the nature of the art of music as the invention of both movable type and the printing press had on literature. The technology quickly dominated the art.

Just as the invention of movable type had opened up literature to the masses, so recordings democratized music. The historical significance cannot be underestimated. But there was a negative aspect to the mechanical reproduction of music, too. Folk music, the art people created for themselves in the absence of professional musicians, was greatly attenuated. In the end, this was a small price to pay for the vast new channels of dissemination and, in fact, the new musical literacy that recordings helped to create later redounded to the benefit of the popular musical arts, which have in the twentieth century become the focal point of the musical world as they never were in earlier times.

While the invention of the phonograph had a profound sociological effect on music, it had a very minor technical effect. There were good technological reasons for this, having to do with the limitations of Edison's system, which will



Nancarrow
piano roll



Goldberg
Variations



be discussed in the next chapter. As a result, it was not until the late 1940s and early 1950s—when magnetic tape began to replace the phonograph record as the main means of recording, and electrical transcription yielded to electronic methods—that music technique came under the influence of the recording arts.

Again, the effect was revolutionary. Musicians had been experimenting with electronic instruments for years before the development of magnetic tape, but they were still bound by the limits of performance. Tape freed them, and allowed the possibility of editing music. The film soundtrack, which was optical rather than magnetic, had predicated tape by twenty years, but in the context of film it had always been relegated to a supporting role; it was never an independent medium.

Once tape entered the recording studio, sound recording was no longer simply a means of preserving and disseminating a performance; it now became a main focus of creativity. Recording is now so much an integral part of the creation of music that even popular music (to say nothing of avant-garde and elite music) has become since the early fifties a creature of the recording studio rather than performance. The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), a milestone in the development of the practical recording arts, was not reproducible in performance. There had been many earlier examples of this shift of focus, dating back at least as early as the popular records of Les Paul and Mary Ford in the early fifties, but the Beatles' record is generally regarded as the coming of age of recording as one of the primary creative musical forces.

The balance has altered so radically now that “performances” of popular music (to say nothing of avant-garde performances) often integrate recordings, and much music simply can't be performed at all live. If the techniques of visual recording had had as great an effect on theater, then a standard popular theatrical performance today would consist in large part of film, and avant-garde theater would consist almost entirely of film!

Clearly, the relationship between sound recording and the musical arts is very complex. We have described only the bare outlines of the new dialectic here. It may be most significant that, unlike the technique of image recording, the technique of sound recording was quickly integrated with the art of music. Film was seen from the very beginning as a separate art from theater and paint-



Paul and
Ford



ing and the novel; but sound recording even today is still subsumed under the category of music.

Partially, this is the result of the mode of recording—discs—that pertained until the 1960s. Unlike film, discs could simply record and reproduce their material, not re-create it. But the development of tape and electronic technology added an element of creativity to sound recording. If anything, sound recording is now more flexible and sophisticated than image recording. It may be only a matter of time before sound recording is seen as a separate art. If radio had survived the invention of television, this would have happened sooner, but coincidentally, just as sound recording was emerging as an art in its own right around 1950, radio art was being submerged by television. It is only now beginning to recover its flexibility.

Significantly, sound recording as an integral component of cinema also languished during those years and has itself only recently begun to reemerge. Ideally, sound should be the equal of image in the cinematic equation, not subservient, as it is now. In short, film has only begun to respond to the influence of the art of music.

Film and the Environmental Arts



If there is one category of art that has been relatively immune to the influence of film and the recording arts, it is architecture. Unlike the novel, painting, and music, the environmental arts have not responded directly to the new mode of discourse. In fact, we can discern a more fruitful relationship between drama and architecture than between film and architecture. Not only has the function of the theater as a building had a direct effect on the art produced inside it: architectural constructions themselves have become a part of performance. This phenomenon dates back at least as far as the Masques of the early seventeenth century, whose elaborate “strange devices”—especially those of the architect Inigo Jones—held pride of place. More recently, the movement toward environmental theater, with its concurrent theory that the audience should participate physically in the space of a production as well as in its narration, has led to an even more intimate union of drama and theatrical architecture.

But, as Brecht and Artaud understood, the Achilles heel of film art lies precisely here: we cannot enter into the world of the image physically. Images of film can surround us, overwhelm us psychologically, but we are still structurally separate. Even so-called Virtual Reality media beg the question: you still can't touch or feel the environment they create. We cannot interact with film. Meanwhile, architecture—more than any other art—insists on and requires interaction. Its function is to serve practical aims, and its form follows from that.

Until now, the relationship between film and the environmental arts has remained metaphorical rather than direct. Film can give us a record of architecture (as it can give us a record of any of the other arts), but this hardly constitutes a dialectical relationship. The theory of film montage may have had some slight effect on architectural theory, but it's safe to say this influence was minimal, at best. Likewise, although our sense of film as a "constructed" work is strong, it is the metaphor of construction rather than the actual craft of building design that governs it.

But while this has been true in the past, the future may hold some surprises. "Pop" architecture—the Las Vegas esthetic—comes closer to comparing with the structure of cinema than does the kind of elite architecture with formal artistic intentions that has until recently occupied exclusively the attention of architectural critics and historians. As a social and political expression of the culture, architecture may be more closely parallel with film than it seems at first glance. In the late sixties (especially in *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*, 1966) Jean-Luc Godard first explored these admittedly tenuous connections. In the 1970s and 1980s, architect/critics Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Stephen Izenour approached the film/architecture connection from the opposite point of view. In an exhibition they designed called "Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City" (Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1976), the Venturis utilized a system of electronically controlled painting developed by the 3M Company to produce life-size, vividly realistic evocations of city scenes that they then integrated with actual constructions.

The ramifications of this technique could be considerable. Insofar as architecture is an art of environment rather than simply a system of construction, the objective visual component might very well be susceptible to photographic—and possibly cinematographic—production. Thomas Wilfred's landmark "lumia" light sculptures, as well as the "light shows" common as accom-



Hollander on Graphics



Godard's Cup



Signs of Life



paniment to rock music performances in the late 1960s, also point to interesting applications of cinematic techniques to environmental situations.

In the early 1990s, Bill Gates, wealthy founder of the Microsoft corporation, built a large home for himself near his company's headquarters in Redmond, Washington. This sedate mansion was equipped with numerous large wall screens meant to display—electronically—great artworks for which Gates, separately, had acquired electronic distribution rights. The result? A kind of virtual Xanadu, the software mogul's answer to the press mogul's mansion 700 miles down the Pacific Coast Highway.

While it's hard to see how the integration of photography and architecture could lead to anything more than simple *trompe-l'oeil* effects, this growing concern with the artificiality of the visual environment has been foreshadowed by contemporary developments in what we might call “sound architecture.” Just as architects have always been concerned with the physical environment we experience, usually as it is transmitted to us visually, so now the aural environment is drawing their attention.

The Muzak of 1960s and 1970s elevators, shopping centers, and office buildings was the first example of an aural environment. The “Environment” series of electronically constructed or modified recordings produced by Syntonic Research, Inc. in the early 1970s offered more elaborate examples. Computer-designed reconstructions of natural sounds such as ocean waves, rain, and birdsong, they provided the first psychologically affective aural backgrounds. Socially, the omnipresence of radio and many types of television perform a similar function: they serve as backgrounds, aurally and visually, against which we play out our everyday lives.

While the public experience of Muzak was in decline throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the private experience of the near-ubiquitous Walkman has taken its place. We now create our own individual, portable sound environments to carry with us wherever we go. If the Walkman was the first step to private virtual realities, the cellular phone was the second. Enough of these very private devices have been sold in the U.S. that it is conceivable that there could come a time soon when *absolutely no one will be listening to the real world.**⁵ This possibility gives new meaning to the conundrum that asks, “If a tree falls in the forest, and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?” and it raises



Xanadu



Syntomics

some serious questions about the electronic society, which we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7.

At present, the art of such cultural elements is of a very low grade: sound environments are more a problem than a feature of contemporary life. But eventually that problem will be confronted and architects, charged with responsibility for the effect of our artificial world, will become as deeply involved in the aural environment as the visual, and recordings of both will become integrated as a matter of course with the physical, concrete design of our environment.



Car Alarms

The Structure of Art

Film, sound recording, and video, then, have had profound effects on the nature and development of nearly all the other, older arts and have in turn to a considerable extent been shaped by them. But while the spectrum of arts is wide, the domain of film and the recording arts is even wider. Film, records, and tapes are media: that is, agencies or channels of communication. While art may be the main use to which they are put, it is clearly not the only use. Film is also an important scientific tool that has opened up new areas of knowledge. It provides the first significant general means of communication since the invention of writing more than seven thousand years ago.



As a medium, film needs to be considered as a phenomenon very much like language. It has no codified grammar, it has no enumerated vocabulary, it doesn't even have very specific rules of usage, so it is very clearly not a language *system* like written or spoken English; but it nevertheless does perform many of the same functions of communication as language does. It would then be very useful if we could describe the way film operates with a degree of logical precision. In Chapter 5 we will discuss how the desire to describe a rational—even scientific—structure for film has been one of the main motivations of film theorists for more than half a century.

Since the 1960s, semiotics has presented an interesting approach to the logical description of the languagelike phenomenon of film and the other record-

ing arts. The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure laid the groundwork for semiotics in the early years of this century. Saussure's simple, yet elegant, idea was to view language as simply one of a number of systems of codes of communication. Linguistics, then, becomes simply one area of the more general study of systems of signs—"semiotics" (or "semiology").

Film may not have grammar, but it does have systems of "codes." It does not, strictly speaking, have a vocabulary, but it does have a system of signs. It also uses the systems of signs and codes of a number of other communication systems. Any musical code, for instance, can be represented in the music of film. Most painterly codes, and most narrative codes, can also be represented in film. Much of the preceding discussion of the relationship between film and the other arts could be quantified by describing the codes that exist in those other arts that can be translated into film as opposed to those that cannot. Remember Frost: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." So the genius of an art may be just those codes that don't work well in any other art.

Yet while the code system of semiotics goes a long way toward making possible a more precise description of how film does what it does, it is limited in that it more or less insists that we reduce film, like language, to basic discrete units that can be quantified. Like linguistics, semiotics is not especially well adapted to describing the complete, metaphysical effect of its subject. It describes the language, or system of communication, of film very well. But it does not easily describe the artistic activity of film. A term borrowed from literary criticism may be useful in this respect: "trope."



Generally, in literary criticism the term "trope" is used to mean "figure of speech": that is, a "turn" of phrase in which language is bent so that it reveals more than literal meanings. The concepts of code and sign describe the elements of the "language" of an art; the concept of trope is necessary to describe the often very unusual and illogical way those codes and signs are used to produce new, unexpected meanings. We are concerned now with the active aspect of art. "Trope," from the Greek *tropos* (via Latin *tropus*) originally meant "turn," "way," or "manner," so even etymologically the word suggests an activity rather than a static definition.

Rhythm, melody, and harmony, for example, are essential codes of music. Within each of these codes there are elaborate sets of subcodes. A syncopated beat, such as that essential to the idiom of jazz, can be considered as a subcode. But the exciting, idiosyncratic syncopations of Thelonious Monk's music are



tropes. There is no way to quantify them scientifically; and that, precisely, is the genius of Thelonious Monk.

Likewise, in painting, form, color, and line are generally regarded as the basic codes. Hard edges and soft edges are subcodes. But the precise, exquisite lines of a painting by Ingres, or the subtle soft edges of a study by Auguste Renoir, are idiosyncratic tropes.

In stage drama, gesture is central to the art, one of its basic codes. The offering of a ringed hand for the kiss of devotion is a specific subcode. But the way Laurence Olivier performs this gesture in *Richard III* is very peculiarly his own: a trope.

The system of an art can generally be described in semiotic terms as a collection of codes. The unique activity of an art, however, lies in its tropes. Film can be used to record most of the other arts. It can also translate nearly all the codes and tropes common to narrative, environmental, pictorial, musical, and dramatic arts. Finally, it has a system of codes and tropes all its own, unique to the recording arts.

Its own codes and tropes stem from its complex technology—a new phenomenon in the world of art and media. For an understanding of how film is *unlike* all the other arts—the second stage of our investigation—it is necessary to take a close look at that technology: this is the subject of Chapter 2.

Poetry is what you can't translate. Art is what you can't define. Film is what you can't explain. But we're going to try, anyway.

