DAVID JAMES

# Hardcore:
## Cultural Resistance in the Postmodern

*(think of punk rock or pornography)*
—Fredric Jameson

With the destruction or co-optation of working-class movements in the US since the thirties, opposition to capitalism has increasingly been mobilized around Third World struggles of decolonization. But since the end of the invasion of Vietnam, cultural practice in the West has lost even this focus of resistance and become increasingly collusive and administered, mirroring indeed a depletion of working-class self-consciousness so devastating that it has allowed an unprecedented currency for attacks on the tenability of basic Marxist concepts, even that of class. Here, in the Baudrillardian hyperspace of the postmodern, cultural resistance seems so impossible that we are all but persuaded to rewrite the entire history of modernism around that impossibility. In the dismal glitter of our time, when the emblems of the Russian Revolution decorate our T-shirts and the Cabaret Voltaire is an only mildly fractious dance band, we wonder indeed if a real avant-garde ever existed. Despite this suspicion, we nevertheless still recognize that postmodern culture is integrated into the corporate state to an unprecedented degree. Today (and now I return my epigraph to its context), "although postmodernism is . . . offensive . . . (think of punk rock or pornography), it is no longer at all 'oppositional' . . . indeed, it constitutes the very dominant or hegemonic aesthetic of consumer society itself and significantly serves [its] commodity production" (Jameson, 1984:196).

For film and television history, a narrative form of this doxa would trace the termination of the great efflorescence of sixties avant-garde film at the end of the Vietnam war, and then a shift from film to video as the preferred high-art motion-picture medium. Though the social energies that produced the sixties' avant-gardes did temporarily sustain video practices more or less modelled on structural film's exemplary negativity, they were so weakened that by the late seventies artist's video had collapsed into the backside of the beast. In short, television—video and broadcast television together—is the postmodern mutant form of film, and in it both illusionist narrative and its discontents, both the entertainment industry and opposition to it, are subsumed in the same hegemony. Disdaining attachment to social contestation or even disaffiliation, the tropes of high modernism linger only as reflexive signs that constantly defer extra-textual engagement.

While accepting this account as generally true, I want to propose some contrary instances to what Jameson considers spurious and illusionary resistance. I argue that in the early eighties certain extremely marginal forms of punk and pornography did in fact sustain opposition to the aesthetics of the hegemony and to commodity culture. Marking a survival of sixties' utopianism, these forms of erotic and music video (which I link but do not equate in the epithet "hardcore") constituted a survival of the project of the classic avant-garde—the turn of cultural practice against the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy and against the distribution apparatus bourgeois art depends on (Bürger, 1984: 22). Their demonstration of the cultural possibilities and also the limitations of the present is particularly sharp since the sixties American avant-garde film, arguably the most powerful oppositional art since World War II, was itself directly constructed upon a parallel documentation of illicit sexual and musical practices.

* * * * *

Simultaneously avant-garde and documentary in a way matched only by the early Soviet cinema, Underground Film emancipated itself from Hollywood by reproducing in the filmic the properties of the aberrant or proscribed sexual and musical practices that preoccupied the profilmic. The quasi-vérité documentation

of jazz musicians in films like *Shadows* and *Pull My Daisy* allowed improvisation, performative virtuosity, spontaneity, and the other compositional procedures of jazz to be enacted in film shooting and editing. Similarly, the transgressions of the codes of sexual representation that followed amateur documentation of domestic sexuality by, for example, Jack Smith, Stan Brakhage and Carolee Schneemann supplied the avant-garde's formal excess and "sterility" (Lyotard, 1978), the promiscuous visual surplus to the narrative economy of industrial features.

As the New Hollywood of the late sixties appropriated sanitized forms of these innovations, so the social and aesthetic transgression of their origins were absorbed by the culture generally. Afro-American guitarists replaced Afro-American saxophonists as the dominant influence on youth music, and the marginality of jazz gave way to the very different social dynamics of rock, which eventually became the single most important mechanism for incorporating youth dissidence. At the same time, explicit sexual representation, including a new spectacularization of the male body and more or less overt homosexual iconography (as for example in Sylvester Stallone's films), was thoroughly integrated into the entertainment and advertising industries.

While these assimilations of sixties recalcitrance do exemplify the postmodernist closure, nevertheless the industrial functions they sustain do not totally occupy the cultural field nor entirely pre-empt popular alternatives. During the same period, unincorporated minority video practices of musical and sexual documentary emerged—partially in reaction against them and partially negotiated in the space they have made available—which do figure resistance and perhaps even utopian alterity. In these, as in sixties avant-garde film, the formal qualities of the video-text and its social uses refract and elaborate the conditions of the music and sex they document, producing formal and operational differences from the hegemonic televisual modes. Their textual offensiveness mobilizes their challenge to both the entertainment industry and also the other institutions integrated with that industry, various journalistic and academic systems, including the one element in the post-modern hegemony that, while it has silently been speaking here, has not so far acknowledged itself: film theory.

While it may be argued that postmodern Theory sustains a form of Adornian negativity lost to art proper, it is equally plausible to regard it as a symptom of the very closures it purports to diagnose. The mutually sustaining philosophical, critical and journalistic discourses that have developed in the tow of post-structuralism and a revived Culture Criticism display a conceptual and terminological density, reminiscent of the "difficulty" of modern art, which marks their resistance to easy consumption. Yet, in the insatiable market for text, itself floated on increasingly "pure" information, these discourses themselves become commodities. Lacking any affiliation with working-class movements, they are easily institutionalized and assimilated into consumer society in general. The imbrication of allegedly radical art history in the world of corporate finance via the apparatus of museums and gallery-supported magazines is the most glittering form of this collusion; but other cultural writings have their own form of it, film criticism especially. And ever since high-modernist literature became undergraduate texts, the academy itself has been a prime agent in the construction of postmodern culture; we academics welcome a plethora of previously taboo practices with a broadmindedness that was not available to the sixties avant-gardes, certainly not to sixties film.

A crucial figuration of the incompatibility of the sixties' film and the academy is preserved in a *locus classicus* of the Underground innovations I have mentioned, Jonas Mekas's *Lost, Lost, Lost*. The crisis of this film (and we inherit it as the documentation of one of the half-dozen paradigmatic shifts in the practices of cinema) occurs when Mekas and Ken Jacobs take prints of *Flaming Creatures* and *Blonde Cobra* to the Flaherty Film Seminar at Brattleboro in 1963. These two films, previously recognized by Mekas in *Village Voice* articles as "impure, naughty and 'uncinematic'" (Mekas, 1972:95), films "without inhibitions, sexual or any other kind" (ibid.:86), are refused entry to the conference, and the cinephiles are obliged to spend the night outside in their cars. But next morning, as they shoot home-movies to document their exclusion from the seminar, Mekas discovers what will henceforward be his signature improvisational style, his own form of "blowing as per jazz musician" (Kerouac, 1958:72) in film, and returns to New York and to his life's work of creating

the institutions of an independent film culture.

Some 25 years later *Lost, Lost, Lost* is beginning to have a place in academic film criticism (though *Flaming Creatures* and *Blonde Cobra* do not). But given what is at stake in the film, this and similar instances of theory's openness to the avant-garde may be as discomforting to those of us who have most desired it as it is to those who have most resisted it, if for quite different reasons. If we understand the avant-garde as of social rather than merely formal importance, we must wonder whether this new legitimacy signals the evaporation of the very alterity to which we made our commitment. On the one hand we fear that the toleration of our enthusiasms indicates their historical supercession or only an illusory offensiveness that is in fact functional within the post-modern hegemony. On the other hand, we must ask, if indeed there were a video practice today as radically innovative as the Baudelairean cinema was in its time, could—or should—we be any more receptive than the Brattleboro seminar? Would we be able to see it? And if we could see it and talk about it, what would that imply?

Questions like this forewarn me that I should not be surprised if the search for the unsayable leads to the unspeakable.

*The Best of Amateur Erotic Video Volume 11* is a compilation of four tapes, each 15–20 minutes long, self-photographed and self-produced by middle-class, heterosexual, white couples.[1] In three of them, the couples have intercourse, while in the other first the woman and then the man masturbates separately. Each section is prefixed by a title giving the participants' first names and an identification number, usually with some form of invitation; "Debra and Earl from California," for instance, request "correspondence from anyone viewing their tape." The tape as a whole and its separate sections are briefly introduced by an unseen woman speaking for "Susan's Video," the distributing agency. The tape is available by mail without charge in direct exchange for a tape of your own sexual activity for inclusion in future collections, though it may also be obtained by purchase.

As text, the compilation differs sharply from commodity pornography. Since the tape shamelessly proclaims erotic representation as its *raison d'être,* it is not obliged to disguise itself as either narrative or documentary. The sexual encounters are not motivated by spurious narrative intrigues; without a plot, there can be no assumption of character, no role-playing which would justify the sexual activity as the representation of the behavior, deviant or not, of some other persons. Nor, apart from the minimal introductions noted, are the sexual encounters or the video photography of them framed by any normative meta-discourse that would justify their introduction as anthropological data or evidence of pathology. As a consequence of this self-sufficiency, the tape displays a diegetic steadiness, quite unlike industrial pornography's ontological tensions between fiction and the sheer *vérité* presentation of sexual activity, and its parallel formal tensions between a propulsive narrative and the interludes of its retardation.

While recent technical advances in home-video equipment allow an image quality at least as good as that of the average sixties 16mm stag film, photography and editing are rudimentary and clearly nonprofessional, with a stationary camera and deep-focus long takes being the norm (though the woman's masturbation scene is shot by her partner with a very energetic hand-held camera that suggests a direct erotic interchange). There is little use of close-ups and no intra-sequential editing, no parallel montages between genital contact and the facial response shots which register its effect. The grammatical primitiveness of this uninflected, non-suturing style culminates in a signal absence of one of the most bizarre but nevertheless ubiquitous tropes of pornography, the close-up on the man's ejaculation and the organization of patterns of formal crisis and resolution around it. Finally where (except in very specifically bracketed situations) pornography effaces its own production, here the performers recognize and address the apparatus, frequently making eye contact with the camera or watching themselves on a monitor, and comment on the fact that photography is taking place.

Distinguishing the amateur erotic video from industrial pornography, these formal differences mark the tape's deficiencies in the latter's terms, its failure to provide intensely focussed visual eroticism or to generate a compelling play of excitement and frustration. I find it less arousing and so less desirable than its industrial counterpart. But they also trace substantial differences in the social relations that the tape

constructs and the activities it promotes, particularly as these re-align the priorities between the pleasures of sexual contact itself and those of its optical or technical mediation and social broadcast. (1) Where in pornography the performers' pleasure is subordinated to their instrumentality in commodity film production, here those pleasures are primary and themselves determine textual organization. (2) Where in pornography the implications of observation and the consequent pleasures of exhibitionism must be repressed, here they are foregrounded. (3) Where in pornography the sexual activity depicted is always categorically unavailable to the spectator—the price of scopophilic delight is the absolute impossibility of physical contact between the performers and the spectator—here the text proposes such contact; it proposes itself as the means to it and as the means to a social network of pleasure that includes but is not limited to looking.

Pornography demands that the actors sacrifice their pleasure to the procedures of film manufacture and to the text's manipulation of its future spectators' desire. The rhythm of copulation is interrupted by the requirements of the camera set-ups, the lighting apparatus, the shooting schedules and the other exigencies of production.[2] Indeed, the better the pornography, the more the actors' actual satisfaction is displaced into the most visually titillating display of it; the signs of sexual pleasure have a higher priority than the performance of it. Subordinating the somatic to the visual, and the experiential to the spectacular, the commodity function is thus inscribed in the photographic and editing conventions. Its demands are epitomized in the male's obligation to allow the camera to see his climax; at the point where his satisfaction would reach its fulfillment, he must withdraw; his need to make his orgasm visible obliges him to sacrifice its most pleasurable form. Some of this obligation to the filmic and the industrial tropes that accommodate it are present in the amateur tapes: the performer/photographers occasionally attempt genital close-ups and they do adjust their positions for the camera. But in general the tapes reflect the phases and drives of the performers' own activity in a less mediated way; pace and construction are dictated by their pleasure rather than by aesthetic and generic requirements or the spectators' needs, and in only one instance does the male withdraw to ejaculate; in fact Susan's guide for contributors specifically recommends that this be avoided (Meredith, 1982:83).

The performers' orientation around their own rather than the spectators' pleasure allows them both to acknowledge the apparatus and to engage the particular pleasures of exhibitionism and narcissism it allows. In pornography, which takes over the illusionist pretensions of the commercial feature film, self-consciousness is normally proscribed unless it is intradiegetically narrated in stories about film-making. Since the actors' market value depends on the conjunction of their actual unavailability to the spectator and the latter's imaginary encounter with them that the text affords, they may not admit that they are being observed by the camera, by the people on the set or by the future spectator. But since the purpose of the amateur tapes is to introduce—perhaps even physically—the performers to the spectators, bridging the division between producer and consumer that commodity culture depends on, the vehicle of their contact may be acknowledged. The different economies correspond to different psychological states: the voyeurism of pornography depends on concealed observation, while here the performers' self-consciousness allows them the pleasures of exhibitionism, of seeing themselves reflected back by the monitor or by the more extended gaze of the tape's social distribution. Their blatant self-display releases them from guilt and invites a similarly shameless gaze for the spectator, whose participation is implicit throughout (though it is especially clear in the woman's direct address to the camera in her masturbation scene). The acknowledged visual intercourse between performer and spectator allows the tape to figure the possibility of transcending the commodity relations of pornography by adding video to one's own erotic activity and by joining the tape network as a producer.

Thus, though the sexual activity is so conventionally that of the heterosexual couple that it appears to reinforce sexual conservativism, if not the nuclear family itself, the tape implies other, more properly promiscuous, scenes, not only the "kinkier" material that the voice-over introduction mentions as being available, but the expanded circuits of promiscuous sexual adventure. The tape's final function of sexual advertising, of making sexual pleasure more available rather than repressively channelling

desire into administered forms, marks then the limitations of any approach to it as representation; finally it cannot be evaluated apart from the sexual encounters it occasions,[3] even though the crucial phases in this process, the video-taping of domestic sex acts, is textually recorded.

What are the implications of introducing video into lovemaking? Initially my Luddite technophobia is checked by my inability to draw a logical line that would differentiate video from mirrors or just looking in the enhancement of erotic pleasure. But my discomfort at this mechanization of vision—my fear that sooner or later sex without Sony won't do it any more and that this is only a last and hyperbolic instance of a culturally pandemic supplantation of the real by the simulacrum—reads it as a final step in the internalization of the ubiquitous apparatus of surveillance. As a form of autosurveillance, it completes the *industrialization* of the body, continuous with the total penetration of the spectacle and the corporation, the *incorporation* of desire itself.

These ambiguities are the ambiguities of the apparatus and so those of video in general, and they register an important difference between the epochs of film and television. Though home-movie equipment was available as early as the 1920s, the medium's development almost exclusively as an industry allowed the sixties avant-garde to be understood correctly as a *liberation* of the apparatus; conversely the alternative systems of distribution—the alternative cinemas—of the sixties were dogged by the cost of film and the unwieldiness of the machines (dependence on labs, the bulkiness and fragility of projectors). But video's popular availability, its cheapness and its ease of reproduction, means that the subcultural self-representation and the extra-industrial circulation of representations that the sixties political cinemas could only dream of are now realizable. Nothing prevents us from shedding corporate aesthetics by becoming producers rather than consumers of television except the residual prejudices of commodity art production and the internalization of industrial production values. Over the past ten or so years, this internalization has resulted in so-called artist's video, as the form of appearance of its own assimilation, fetishizing industrial-quality image manipulation. In this context, rejection of such values with willful *video brut* can inscribe a more general ideological rejection, as indeed in its early years artists' video defined itself against broadcast television in a negative aesthetic, partially derived from structural film's critique of the illusionism of the commerical feature. This negativity disappeared from film and television practices of all kinds as its social preconditions evaporated in the mid-seventies; but the same aesthetic model revived almost immediately in the field of music as the axiom of punk.

Since one of punk's determining strategies was its deliberately rude infraction of aesthetic and social norms, the use of the terminology of the obscene and the illicit was entirely logical; the onomastic continuity of the term "hardcore" recalls early punk's use of bondage and fetish iconography, the use of pornographic films in punk concerts, the use of punk iconography in industrial pornography (e.g., *New Wave Hookers*), and more recently, certain pornographic films made within the punk subcultures (e.g., those of Richard Kern). More precisely, "hardcore" was a purist style of the music developed initially in Washington, DC, and Southern California in the early eighties. This, the music's essential, its "classical," mode, mounted a deliberately anachronistic attempt to sustain early punk's negativity against its diffusion and assimilation by the music industry as various forms of new wave. The entirely recalcitrant music provided a besieged subculture with the basis for defensive rituals in which the sonic (and other forms of) violence and the obstinate antiprofessionalism that signalled rejection of overproduced corporate rock also informed strategies of negation and antigrammaticality for everyday self-presentation and the other cultural practices. Crucial in these intertwined social and aesthetic developments were fanzines, largely reader-written magazines which provided musical information and social exchanges of all kinds. Contributing not just to the documentation of the subculture, but also to its formation and dissemination, fanzines provided a participatory forum, necessary as a defense against misrepresentation in the establishment media and against regular police rioting.

The most important fanzine in Southern California was *Flipside,* established in 1977, which in 1984 began to distribute compilations of concert footage as *Flipside Video Fanzines.* Number Nine, "When Can I Sleep In Peace,"[4] for example, has 19 cuts by 11 commercially unprofitable bands, none of whom had corporate

recording contracts. The songs all employ a brutally reductionist and visceral musical style, whose masculinist values are summarized in the priorities, "Faster, Louder, Shorter." When they are intelligible, the equally aggressive, blatantly agitational lyrics blast the religious right, the military-industrial complex, the government and the police, making explicit a categorical opposition to the corporate state; their ideological field is announced in the songs' titles: MDC sing "Corporate Death Burger" and "Church and State"; the Dicks sing "Sidewalk Begging," "Hate the Police" and "No War"; the Dead Kennedys sing "Moral Majority" and "Chemical Warfare"; BGK sings "Vivisection" and "Arms Race"; and Conflict sings "From Protest to Resistance."

Like the music, the videos flaunt scorched-earth production values. Featuring live, unenhanced sound, they are shot in 1/2" with home cameras that lack color adjustment so that the light is not balanced and the color not always correctly keyed. They consist of rudimentary edits of footage shot at concerts simultaneously by two cameras, one placed among the audience fronting the stage, the other shooting from the side of the stage to include both performers and audience together within the frame. They contain no image manipulation, close-ups, or special effects except for the occasional superimposition of synchronous footage from the camera covering the band and that covering the audience; this trope has great symbolic weight since it figures the ritual passage of the audience over the stage and their contestation of the band's position on it and reproduces the breakdown of the distinction between audience and band that is central to punk's alterity to corporate culture. The tape does contain some other material; it opens with a crude collage of television commercials and news violence (a juxtaposition which summarizes the music's attack on consumerism and state violence) and some songs are illustrated with simple cutaways; accompanying the Dicks' "Sidewalk Begging" are shots of the homeless, while the photography of BGK's "Vivisection" is interpolated with anti-vivisectionist publicity stills. Otherwise, the tape is as raw as the music itself.

The tapes are not collectively produced and they are sold, and so in respect to the social relations their consumption mobilizes they are less radical an intervention than the erotic videos. But the commodity relations they generate are minimized; they are very cheap, costing little more than enough to return production costs and allow further compilations. Production is anonymous and since no individual authorship is announced, the art-work remains within the subculture as its autonomous self-representation and self-expression. Produced and consumed entirely within the subculture, it promotes a radically amateur aesthetic that refuses the industrial distinction between artist and market. As far as the material conditions of the medium allow, then, the fanzine reproduces in video the negative determination and positive strategies of hardcore music as well as its aesthetic and social values; denying the consensus and refusing the socialization which industrial culture merchandizes, it resists corporate assimilation and so preserves a space for social alterity.

As they document and sustain the music's resistance to the commercial functions of new wave, hardcore video fanzines define themselves generally against the panoply of corporate film and television appropriations of popular music, and specifically against the two primary forms of that appropriation: music videos in their summary form of MTV, and feature films about punk, including ostensibly sympathetic documentaries. These industrial forms of the music correspond respectively to what Dick Hebdige noted as the two forms of recuperation of punk in general: music videos to "the conversion of subcultural signs . . . into mass-produced objects (i.e., the commodity form)" and the documentaries to "the 'labelling' and redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups—the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e., the ideological form)" (Hebdige, 1979:94).

Music videos' internalization of the values of industrial culture is evidenced in the correspondences between their grammar and that of television commercials, their recurrence to the most insipid and unchallenging pleasures, their exploitation of sexual stereotypes, and their flaunting of extremely expensive production values in both *mise-en-scène* and special effects. The best of the documentary films (such as Penelope Spheeris's *Decline of Western Civilization* and Lech Kowalski's *D.O.A.*, both of 1980) may be closer to the subcultures; but their mass culture function of re-presenting punk culture to the

general public obliges them to frame the others' discourse in their own. The various interview techniques establish a hierarchy of discourses in which the normativity of the film's own interpellates punk's as deviant. A summary instance of such framing, which is inevitably even more grotesque as it is narrated in mainstream Hollywood films, is the Bad Brains sequence in Scorsese's *After Hours* (1985). While this is one of the few occasions in which anything like hardcore's intensity was captured on film, the narrative denigrates the performance as aberrant, a bizarre miasma in a nightmare of irrationality.

In contradistinction to these, respectively the appropriation and the containment of punk, *Flipside Video Fanzine* places itself within the culture, sustaining and ratifying it from inside. Celebrating and enacting the aesthetic of punk music, it rejects any reconciliation with the industrial media or with the ethics of the corporate state of which those media are an integral part. This larger political contestation, implicit in the tape's form and made possible by the mode of its production, is clearly articulated in the songs' lyrics. The singer directly addresses the audience as a commonality, unified in their defiance of state militarism, and, as noted, the songs explicitly reject the domestic and foreign policies of the Reagan administration. Though all their ideas must be expressed negatively (for the aesthetic system does not allow affirmation), the songs give voice to contestation with a clarity and vehemence such as has rarely been found in American culture since the thirties. This opposition to the corporate state is most focussed where its violence is most immediately experienced, in the local police.[5]

For example, in the introduction to the Dicks' "Hate the Police" the vocalist spells out a crude syllogism; the next song, he tells the audience, "makes you a fucking Dick" because "Dicks hate the police." The outrageous puns spin language, sexuality, and the law into Möbius strips of irony: only those who lack the phallus may be the phallus or, taking the pun on "dick" in the opposite direction, only those who hate the police can be the police. As he launches into his song, warning the police to stay clear of him because he has a gun, general slamdancing mayhem among those of the audience who share his logic and recognize themselves as Dicks ensues. The next clip is from MDC, a polysemous acronym variously elaborated as "Millions of Dead Cops," "Millions of Dead Children" or "Multi-Death Corporation." It begins with the singer chanting "Dead Cops" and grasping his crotch as he mimes pissing on the cops' graves. His song, "Blue By Day," is a vitriolic attack on multinationals, and on "all the stinking rich people" who "run the police departments" and "start all the wars." The indictment of state terrorism galvanizes the audience, precipitating a frenzied but thoroughly eloquent ritual in which they climb on the stage, struggle briefly with the stagehands, perhaps share the microphone for a chorus, and then somersault back into the crowd.

Their logic is sublime: struggle violently to achieve a place in the spectacle, dance briefly in its glare, and then dive out of it, all the while celebrating resistance to authority of all kinds. But to those who are outside the subculture—those perhaps who enjoy "good" TV like "Hill Street Blues" and "Cagney and Lacey" that legitimizes state violence by representing its agents as neurotic bourgeois subjects besieged by "criminals" and the problems of "life"—to these the tape will appear as infantile and regressive as the performances it documents.

Since everywhere in postmodern culture regression is exploited for that frisson of the forbidden which creates an appearance of resistance while in fact renewing consumption, it is especially necessary that merely collusive forms of it be distinguished from others that are not reducible to corporate uses. In industrial culture, a "repressive tolerance" administers regression, channelling it to serve state interests by framing it in equally administered ideological structures (the *Rambo* films again or nubile preteenagers in advertising.) But both the domestic erotica and the punk concert tapes do not so easily allow for vicarious or touristically secure visitation, and indeed retain a truly minatory edge to their attraction. Their threat is partly a semiological consequence of their difference from ordinary documentary, which always presents its content, its profilmic, as a curiosity different from and other than itself. But these tapes refuse that difference; the various forms of identity—ideological, environmental, functional—between the video-text and the events it records tends to collapse the signifier into the signified, the text into its context. Consequently, in both cases, one's response to the tape as artwork is overwhelmingly determined by one's

assessment of the social events it depicts and incites. Since this content is unlawful, for those outside the tight subcultural circle (in which the producers and consumers are largely the same) the tapes themselves can be approved only at the cost of a double apostasy, a rejection of dominant social mores and of dominant media. Endorsing the renegades depicted or recognizing any kinship with them, which is virtually a prerequisite to liking the tapes, also commits you to a video aesthetic whose primary axiom, its *raison d'être* even, is rejection of all other regimes of television—a position which puts in crisis the discursive practices of the dominant socio-aesthetic system. And so commentary on them becomes difficult. If you don't like them, you will abruptly dismiss them as pathological. But if you do like them, especially if you *really* like them, you will be moved not to words but to action, to fucking or slamdancing. The difficulty proposed to humanist discourse, however vertiginous, is not unprecedented in cinema.

The issue has best been approached in psychoanalytic terms by Christian Metz. If cinema's pleasures are intrinsically those of the imaginary, then the theoretician's work in the symbolic, the work of distinguishing the symbolic from the imaginary, is always in danger of being "swallowed up" by the imaginary—the sliding of the *"discourse about the object"* into its opposite, the *"discourse of the object"* (Metz, 1982:5). This attraction is specifically (though surely not exclusively) a filmic one; but if its basis is in the constitutive Oedipality of the cinematic signifier (ibid.: 64), how much greater must it be in texts which engage the sexual drives so directly, without sublimation.[6] Such is the case with these, with their massive affective overload, their overt pandering to the desire to see and the desire to hear. Do the erotic videos fulfill cinema by showing us the primal scene itself instead of that allegory of it which is the reference of all other films (films which it thereby violates, invalidates and renders redundant); or do they destroy cinema by abrogating the voyeuristic precondition of such films, "a pure onlooker whose participation is inconceivable" (ibid.:64)? Similarly, is the nihilistic utopianism of hardcore—a primal scream to the other's primal scene—one that destroys music or a Dionysiac apotheosis of it? Until we have a psychoanalysis of television[7] or punk or pornography, we won't know.

But the issue is also political. The resistance these tapes propose to theory only reiterates their resistance to theory's privileged objects—bourgeois culture. As the contemporary avant-garde film has come to resemble nothing so much as broadcast television (Arthur, 1987:69), as artists' video looks more and more like broadcast television, as theory becomes a circuit in the global economy of television, whatever defines itself as *not-television* can only be talked about in reservations within (or outside) sanctioned discourse, as a rupture in its syntax. If theory can think it, it will only be (as in Jameson's remark) parenthetically.

NOTES

1. For the availability of this and other such tapes, see Meredith (1982). Similar material, which is sometimes advertised in magazines devoted to X-rated video, is referenced in Eder (1968).
2. For a humorous account of the stress of these demands on the pornographic film actor, see Gray (1985).
3. The possibility of imagining such a utopian promiscuity is, of course, severely circumscribed by external conditions; in this case, what developments in birth control in the late sixties made possible was abruptly terminated in the mid-eighties by AIDS.
4. *Flipside Video Fanzines* are available from PO Box 363, Whittier, California 90608. For a subsequent similar project, see *Suburban Relapse Fanzine,* POB 404825, Brooklyn, New York 11240. For an overview of punk fanzines in Los Angeles, see James (1984). For accounts of punk film-making, see Boddy (1981) and Buchsbaum (1981).
5. The violence of the Los Angeles Police Department is widely documented; see, for example, McCartney (1983) and Stark (1986). A collection of mid-eighties' anti-police songs from Southern California was assembled as *The Sound of Hollywood: 3: Copulation* (Mystic Records, MLP 33128).
6. In their fundamental narcissism, their greater emphasis on the profilmic event and less on its subsequent observation by the spectator, these tapes document extreme instances of the first two components (*Partialtrieb*) within the sex instinct, the desire of making oneself seen and the desire of making oneself heard. Lacan (1977: 194–95) proposes that in the former the subject *"looks at himself [sic] . . . in his erotic member"* and that this delight is the "root" of the scopic drive as a whole.
7. This project has, however, been initiated in Houston (1984).

LIST OF WORKS CITED


ARTHUR, Paul. (1987) "Last of the Machine: Avant-garde Film since 1965." *Millennium Film Journal* (16/17/18 (Fall/Winter 1986/87): 69–93.

BODDY, William. (1981) "New York Confidential: An Interview with Eric Mitchell." *Millennium Film Journal,* 7/8/9, 27–36.

BUCHSBAUM, Jonathan. (1981) "A La Recherche des Punks Perdus." *Film Comment,* (May), 43–46.

BÜRGER, Peter. (1984) *Theory of the Avant-Garde.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

EDER, Bruce (1986) "Mail-order Video." *Village Voice,* 16 December, 57–58.

GRAY, Spalding. (1985) "The Farmers' Daughter." *Wild History.* Ed. Richard Prince, New York: Tanam Press.
HEBDIGE, Dick. (1979? *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* New York: Methuen.
HOUSTON, Beverle. (1984) "Reviewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption." *Quarterly Review of Film Studies,* 9, 3, 183-95.
JAMES, David. (1984) "Poetry/Punk/Production: Some Recent Writing in L.A." *The Minnesota Review,* N.S. 23 (Fall 1984), 127-53.
JAMESON, Fredric. (1984) "Periodizing the 60s." *The Sixties Without Apology.* Ed. Sohnya Sayres et al., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
KEROUAC, Jack. (1958) "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose." *Evergreen Review* 2, 5 (Summer 1958) 72-73.
LACAN. Jacques. (1977) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis.* London: Hogarth Press.
LYOTARD, Jean-François. (1978) "Acinema." *Wide Angle* 2,3: 52-59.
MCCARTNEY, Patrick. (1973) "Cops and Punks." *L.A. Weekly,* 5, 47 (21 October), 18-21.
MEKAS, Jonas. (1972) *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema.* New York: Collier.
MEREDITH, Raina. (1982) "The (Amateur) Shtup Tapes." *Village Voice,* 23 November 1982, 82-83.
METZ, Christian. (1982) *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
STARK, Annette. (1986) "There's a Riot Going On." *Spin,* 2, 9 (December), 68-74.

# Reviews

## ROSA LUXEMBURG

**Director: Margarethe von Trotta. Script: Von Trotta. Producer: Eberhard Junkersdorf. Photography: Franz Rath. Music: Nicholas Economou. New Yorker Films.**

Margarethe von Trotta's early work, particularly *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* and *Marianne and Julianne,* drew startlingly effective parallels between personal anguish and political militancy, without reducing social activism to a series of psychological quirks. This alternation between the immediacy of the private realm and public discourse reflected important currents in feminist theory: "Once people do connect deeply felt personal problems to larger political structures, they often go on to make political sense out of the whole society rather quickly. This is not merely hypothetical; many women in the last decade moved rapidly from complaints about sexual relationships to feminism to socialism."[1] Von Trotta's narratives mingled the micropolitics of concerns such as child care and sexuality with an analysis of the German New Left's attempt to extricate itself from the excesses of terrorism that avoided the cliches of conservative Kulturkritik.

At first glance, Rosa Luxemburg seems to be a figure tailor-made for a director of Von Trotta's disposition. Luxemburg was a revolutionary socialist of rare analytic prowess with a rich personal life. Yet Luxemburg's complex and frequently contradictory life is not particularly amenable to the linear demands of film biography. She was one of the revolutionary left's most anomalous figures: a Marxist who refused to capitulate to Leninism, a militant woman who evinced little interest in feminism, a Jew who was rarely preoccupied with anti-Semitism, and a Pole who was severely critical of her compatriots' characteristic nationalism. This fascinating admixture of heroic heterodoxy and occasional wrongheadedness should have provided the impetus for a compelling film, but von Trotta's chronicle of Luxemburg's later years is disappointingly bland. Although this hagiographic "bio-pic" is scrupulously accurate in terms of historical detail—the result of meticulous research—*Rosa Luxemburg* is a misguided homage that, however inadvertently, dilutes the legacy of the woman it attempts to enshrine.

The source of this dilution can be traced to von Trotta's peculiar narrative strategy. Employing a more sophisticated version of narrative schemas cherished by Hollywood since the heyday of *The Story of Louis Pasteur* and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet,* she is loath to include any sequence featuring Rosa Luxemburg's public or political pronouncements without following it with a sequence that highlights her personal or interior life. While this approach might be defensible as a salutary reflection of contemporary feminism's emphasis on the ways