

"ALL THINGS IN THEIR TIMES"

by R. Bruce Elder

(Continued from Cine-Tracts No. 9)

The transformation in the characteristics during the transition from the modernist to the postmodernist era of art work, which I have described in the previous installment of this article, are so profound and far-reaching that they suggest there occurred a change in the very programme which artistic endeavour was understood to carry out. This, I would argue, is true; in fact, I would argue the change was so profound that it reached down into and radically altered the theoretical context which subtended the practice of making art.

The theoretical underpinning of the earlier stages of modernist art (abstract expressionism, for example) were drawn from the aesthetic philosophies of expressionism, Jungian psychoanalysis and existentialism. With the development of minimalism, notions drawn from these fields were replaced with notions drawn from perceptual theory, phenomenology and linguistics. As one would expect, the effect of replacement was to shift the primary concern of artistic practice away from essentialistic and ontological problems to phenomenological and epistemological problems.¹

Thus, minimalism represents a turning point in recent art history: in some of its formal strategies, it manifests the enduring effect of the modernist tradition; in others, it reveals the profound transformation which occurred in the conceptual base underlying artistic production and which continues to affect post-modernist art as it has developed up to this point.

As for other post-modernist artists, for Snow questions of perceptual theory are paramount: as evidence one need only consider that the titles of several of his works — for example, **Blind, Sight, A Wooden Look, Scope, Glares, Hearing Aid** and **New York Eye** and **Ear Control** — themselves reveal an interest in the nature of the perceptual response.

But what, we must ask, are the specific modalities of experience with which Snow deals and what is the relation between his analysis of perception (for his works are decidedly analytic in character) and the form which his art work assumes? Let us begin our response by noting the evident fact that most of his films, and much of his art in general, possess very simple predetermined shapes. While such simple shapes are undeniably correlated to the simple **gestalts** which characterized minimalist art, they have, in his works, a specific and unique function. This uniqueness of this function depends upon the fact that film alone, of all the visual arts, is also an art of time. For this reason, the simple shape of a film can, and in Snow's work usually does, act as a diagramme of its temporal form.² It serves, then, to convert a temporal into a spatial form, giving to that temporal form the same precision and definiteness of a form existing in space. One is tempted to say, with only the slightest degree of hyperbole, that such simple shapes, by converting fluid temporal forms into diagrammatic spatial forms, act to arrest the flow of time, making of time an enduring thing.³

In sum, a diagrammatic shape acts to hypostatize the experience of time. The radicalness of such an enterprise can best be understood in relation to the temporal features of innovative cinema at the time when Snow came to make film. The temporal rhetoric of that cinema had largely been developed by Brakhage; the speed of his cutting, the intensity of his camera movement, the continual displacement of one sort of imagery by imagery of entirely another sort (for example, flat imagery by deep, hand drawn or scratched images by photographic etc.) acted to deny the sense of temporal continuum and to provoke a gaze that is so intense and fascinated that it can properly be called ecstatic. Thus, one feels, when watching a film by Brakhage, that past and future have been eliminated (one neither engages in recollection of past events nor in anticipation of future events); the primary temporal impression afforded by these works is that of a continuous present.⁴

The modality of temporal experience elicited by Snow's film is of a very different character. Far from being caught up in the flow of time, one is, by the hypostatization of the experience of time that the diagrammatic shapes of his films elicit, as well as by the **longeurs** which characterize them, encouraged to stand back from the experience of time and to inquire into the manner in which it is constituted. His films, then, elicit an analytic rather than an ecstatic response.

The analytic act, obviously, is one that depends upon identifying and splitting apart differentiated units. For this reason, it is essential for Snow's work to create a temporal form which includes a variety of characteristics (pastness, presentness and futurity) rather than singularity of the continuous present found in the work of Brakhage. Moreover, the analytic act involves by its very nature the division of object into "static" parts. Thus, the mode of experience elicited by Snow's work has as its object a static object of reflection constituted by an intellectual act.

I am, however, being a little too casual about the description of the experience of watching a film by Michael Snow, — or at least too one-sided, inasmuch as I am failing to indicate the double-sided nature of that experience. For, in a sense, Snow also re-instates the sense of the continuum of time, of the flow from past to present to future, into film. Thus, in addition to hypostatized and static object of reflection, there is a second object, the object of perception, the temporal character of which is uniform and identical in all its parts, and which smoothly unfolds in a cohesive field of time. The opposition between these two objects suggests the difference between an object existing in space and an event which unfolds in time. The duality between these two suggests the duality between the **object** "film" (a strip of celluloid) and the **event** "film" which plays out on a projector.⁵

As we also noted, correlated with each of these two objects is a specific mode of experiencing the object.⁶ This duality is important for several reasons. In part, its importance depends upon the manner in which the distinction points out a fundamental tension that

exists in all aesthetic experience. For the aesthetic experience itself involves both an engrossed and fascinated response and a detached, distanced and critical response. To further explore the importance of each of these modes of response, some further clarity about their nature must be attained.

In a quotation given in the introduction to this issue of **Cine-Tracts**, Husserl notes the way in which self-reflection by stepping outside of the flow of impressions, reveals the existence of the transcendental subject. Similarly, I would argue, the effect of the reflexive mode of experience elicited by Snow's films is to reinstate the transcendental subject in film, or at least filmmaking of independent persuasion. Brakhage's hallucinated gaze had disrupted and dismembered spatial and temporal continuity, leaving no place and time, **no site**, for the subject, particularly, no place for the transcendental subject, for the intensity of gaze Brakhage's films elicited demanded a subject totally occupied in perceptive rather than apperceptive acts. Snow's cinema, in re-establishing a coherent space and thus, re-establishing a site for the transcendental subject was, for many, particularly gratifying, since the sense of transcendental subject is that of a point of stability, of an enduring centre underlying all change. This point, of course, is "the central region" referred to in the film of that title.

We have, then, in Snow's cinema, two subjects, the perceiving and the reflective transcendental subject related to two objects awareness, the film in flux and its hypostatized relative. The various interrelations possible between these two pairs of objects becomes, for Snow, an important resource to be explored. In this way, his work becomes a consideration of the modalities of aesthetic experience itself.

No one, at this point in the history of the avant-garde film could reasonably contest the importance of its place in the history of cinema is secure. But it was not for this reason alone I chose to deal with the film at some length. It was also because the film has played an important role within the history of the avant-garde film in Canada. That particular film, as well as the theoretical context within which it exists, and which it helped to define, have had many profound and far-reaching effects, but none of them is, in my view, more important than the creation of a duality of objects of awareness and of modes of experience. The strategies by which this was achieved have been absorbed into the work of so many other Canadian experimental filmmakers as to have become somewhat commonplace.

In tracing this influence, let us begin with work of the West Coast filmmaker, David Rimmer, and in particular, with his best known film, **Surfacing on the Thames**. That film is based upon a ten-second piece of "found footage" of two ships passing each other as they move in opposite directions along the River Thames. Each film was rear-projected and filmed for several seconds, then lap-dissolved into the succeeding frame.

Like Snow, and unlike the generation of modernists who were largely committed to abstraction,⁷ Rimmer's work has, as a kind of ideal, the inclusion of representational imagery. Like Snow's, it aspires towards, (in Snow's words) a "balancing of illusion and fact"; in his works, we find the representational illusion both presented and subverted. In **Surfacing on the Thames**, as in others of Rimmer's films, (for example, **The Dance** and **Waiting for the Queen**) the importance attached to representation is indicated by the use of found footage.

Furthermore, in Rimmer's work, as in Snow's, the non-illusionistic aspect of the work does not displace the illusionistic; it simply, again Snow's words, "balances" it. This can be seen in the fact that neither filmmaker typically uses teleological structures based upon the film's progress towards abstraction or structures which formally suggest the film's movement towards recovering its essential purity.⁸ Indeed, one of Rimmer's more admirable qualities as a filmmaker is, in my estimation, the extraordinary delicateness of the means by which he subverts the illusionistic effects of cinematic imagery.

This quality is much in evidence in his handling of motion in **Surfacing on the Thames**. That film, of course, based on the reduction of the film's kinesis to an almost, but not quite, imperceptible level. This reduction is accomplished primarily by extending all movements represented in the film across greater periods of time than they would normal-

ly occupy. Indeed, the freeze-frame, the device upon which the film finally rests, gives the film lengthy periods of complete stasis.

This reduction of the film's kinesis has three effects. By extending any movement over a period of time of sufficient length as to make its frame-to-frame variations perceptible, even in their subtlest details, Rimmer makes us aware of the material substrate which conditions the illusion which this film also, at another of its levels, makes use of. The effect is re-inforced by other features which also serve to call attention to the film's materiality.⁹ The film has, for example, an unusually grainy texture produced by the process of rephotography.

By so exaggerating the granular texture of the filmic image, Rimmer accords to the picture plane an additional degree of strength. This, of course, sets up a relationship between the depth of the original image and the surface of picture. Thus, he creates a balance between the three-dimensional imagery and the two-dimensional picture plane, between background and foreground. This sort of "balance" which we earlier discovered as a trait of Snow's work and of other post-modernists is uncharacteristic of the work of modernist artists, for whom the purity of the two-dimensional space and reduction of all elements to the picture plane was of crucial importance.

A second important feature of extending the recorded movement is to deflect one's attention away from the film's micromorphological structures towards its macromorphological structures, that is, towards the film's wholistic shape. This, too, tends to further exaggerate the stasis which characterizes the film, for it converts the temporal flow of the film into a diagrammatic shape.

The third effect is a consequence of the effect just described. By converting the temporal flow of the film into diagrammatic shape, Rimmer elicits a particularly analytic mode of consciousness, making it possible for the view to subject the vagaries of temporal experience to intensive analysis. Thus, in a characteristically post-modernist fashion, Rimmer's work engages with epistemological questions for his concern is with analysis of questions concerning temporal experience, of how experience evolves in time.

Another feature of this work that situates it within the context of post-modernist art is his inclusion of "accidents" which inevitably occur in the process of creating a work, in this case, in the process of rephotography. Rimmer did not rework or exclude those portions of film in which particles of dirt or hair appeared, as they seem always to do, in the process of reprinting. In allowing these "accidents" to reveal themselves, Rimmer is reminding us of the process by which the work is generated.

This reference to production process is distinctly post-modernist rather than modernist in character. Modernism had conceived of the art work as totally autonomous; its ideal was a structure which would be completely comprehensible apart from any consideration of any "genetic factors," whether those factors be features of the artist's personality, of the social formation in which he lived or of the production process itself. A work of art, one often heard it alleged, was capable of being completely exhausted in the act of perception itself. The reference to feature of the production process acted to break the work of art out of that sort of self-containment so highly prized by artists of modernist persuasion.

Wieland's early film work, too, shows the influence of the post-modernism which Snow pioneered. One of the most important features of her work is the relaxation of the rigours of formalist/materialist work. This is indicated in the way in which her work often includes anecdote, symbol and sentimental references. Most important, however, is the way in which she has used a diversity of material in her film work, including representational imagery and written texts. **Solidarity** is exemplary in this respect: the film is composed primarily of images of the feet of marchers at a strike-bound plant, filmed with a hand-held camera, with the word "solidarity" superimposed over the images exactly in the middle of the screen. On the sound track, we hear the off-screen voice of one of the strike leaders.

The image is resolutely realistic. The ideal of abstraction, so important to many formalist filmmakers is nowhere accepted. Even the meaning of the written text is of considerable

importance. Previously, when written texts had been incorporated in a film,¹⁰ they had been used to affirm the two-dimensional plane upon which it rests.¹¹ In this case, the "illusion-defeating" potential of the written text, its ability to subvert the illusion of depth, is only a secondary reason for its use.

Written texts in Wieland's films are used partly in order to make possible complex relations between foreground elements (including the text which lies on the picture plane itself) and background elements (the image or at least those portions of which lie in its illusory deep space). Even in this regard, the post-modern character of Wieland's work is apparent, since the category of foreground-background relations had been rejected by modernists since they depended on the articulation of depth.

But there is an even more important reason for her use of the superimposed lettering in this film. The imagery of this film was taken with a mobile hand-held camera; thus the shots of the marchers involve nearly continual movement. The word "solidarity" superimposed so as to appear in the foreground, in fact, right on the picture plane itself, remains static, fixed in the centre of the screen. Now, as gestalt psychologists have proven, a shot with a moving background and a static foreground will appear to have a moving foreground and a static background. Thus the word "solidarity" appears as though it is sliding over the marchers' feet, in precise correlation with the camera's movement. Thus, this construction suggests the actions of the cameraperson herself.

The implication of this is clear. The hand-held camera, brought into prominence by the use of the superimposed lettering, suggests the filmmaker's presence. The word "solidarity" is used to provide evidence of the filmmaker's presence, of her complicity in the act being filmed, and of her support for their cause. It makes clear, then, that the making of this film is a gesture of solidarity for the striking workers. This openness to other than formal concerns, a characteristic feature of Wieland's work, is again not modernist by nature.

In other films, Wieland has dealt with the relation of word and image in other ways; indeed, she has virtually catalogued the possible forms this relationship can assume. The nature of the relationship between word and image in the film **1933** has already been commented upon. In **Reason over Passion** a printed text of the words to "O Canada" appears on the screen for rather extended length of time. This section of the film was followed by one depicting a person mouthing those words. Somewhat later in the film there occurs a section devoid of any image whatsoever but with sound track consisting of re-recording of phonograph disc of a French lesson; the person who gives the lesson is supposed to be speaking to someone named Pierre. While this name at first refers only to fictional character, it is later attached, in a marvellously parodic manner, to Pierre Trudeau. The French lesson thus transformed into an oblique reference to Trudeau's bilingual policies.

The tension between word and image in all of these passages we have described is based on the opposition between the literalness of the words — their potential "specificness" of meaning — and the ambiguity and "polysemicness" of the image which a word restricts through the process of anchoring. This process of anchoring would, of course, have been abhorrent to modernists.

Like the works of Snow and Rimmer this work, too, has the idea of the frame as one of its central concerns. The fact that voice heard on the sound emanates from an off-screen space, as well as the peculiarly restricted reminds the viewer of the presence of a space lying beyond the frame-edge. Wieland points out that frame is not what it was conceived to be in modernist theory, i.e. as a device of containment which, by isolating the space to be filled with forms, defined the perimeters of the total space the constructed forms must fill and so the nature of the forms to be constructed. Rather Wieland points towards a more pluralistic conception of the frame: the frame-edge, it is suggested, insofar as it demarcates in a somewhat arbitrary fashion on-screen space and off-screen space, operates as a transitional rather than a boundary device. It also, Wieland points out, acts as generator of metaphor and thus of meaning.

Like Snow, Wieland, too, cycles material she uses from medium to medium. She has worked not only in film but also in painting, printmaking and quiltmaking. (She has even made a film, a quilt and a painting with the same title, **Reason over Passion.**) In **Hand Tinting**

(1967-68) she used the same dyes she was using in her textile works as a means of colouring film. The application by hand of the dyes led to a streaking of the colours, an effect which tends to disorient the viewer. Too, the irregularities of the hand-tinting, the variations in their intensity and the placement of colours from frame to frame foreground the intermittency of the projection apparatus. These hand-tinted sections occurring between "realistic" shots, create effects of a purely abstract and material order and so foreground film's material substrate. The "descriptive" imagery make a similar reference to the film's materials; in some of the film's images, the grain appears to have swollen, drawing attention to film's emulsion, and occasionally a sprocket perforation appears, drawing attention to the physical properties of the film strip itself. Thus, the film includes purely descriptive imagery, descriptive imagery which has been reworked and purely abstract imagery. I have suggested previously that incorporation of imagery of such a diverse nature has become characteristic of recent filmmaking.

These "illusion defeating-devices" operate in concert with other devices in the film. The film was constructed from material from a Job Corps documentary on which Wieland had worked as cameraperson in the years 1965 and 1966. In making **Hand Tinting**, Wieland edited the footage to emphasize qualities of disjunction and repetition; no action, depicted in the footage is allowed to complete itself, material unrelated to the recreational activities of the poor women is incorporated into the film and certain actions are repeated several times. The effect of this is to distance and to ritualize the depicted actions.

These "illusion defeating-devices" operated on the level of the dismemberment of pictorial continuity. The use of dyes operates on a somewhat different level. The tinted sections between the shots creates no illusion of depth whatsoever; the colour appears to lie on the picture plane. Thus, they make reference to the surface of the screen.

My own early work shared several traits with the works already discussed. **She is Away**, for example, is a work whose form is that of compositional matrix incorporating material as diverse as pure colour frames, representational imagery, dream imagery and empty frame. The film employs a very simple structure whose shape, if not exactly diagrammatic is, at least, readily perceptible. The **longeurs** of the film, created through the use of prolonged sections of imageless material serve to remind one of the fact of the film's duration while the minimalization of the "content" evokes a reflective mode of consciousness. As a result, the duration of the film becomes a subject of analytic inquiring.

The use of flares at the frame edge, of abrupt and arbitrary changes of hue and saturation of colour alerts one to the movement of the film through the projector. This, together with the fact that imageless frames articulate no depth at all reminds one that the film is strip of every slight thickness that, in regulated period of time, passes in front of the projector's lamp modulating the light passing through it in accordance with colour characteristics of the strip itself.

FOOTNOTES

1. This period (1964-1971), was, remember, the era in which Robert Morris produced "Notes on Sculpture," Smithson several texts on entropy, Judd "Specific Objects" and Shartis several texts (including the extraordinary piece "Words per Page").
2. This is most evidently true of **Wavelength**; the well-known conic shape of that film can be understood to stand as a diagramme for our experience on the "flow" of time. The camera movement in that film like the movement of experience of time, is entirely forward directed.
3. In his discussion with Pierre Théberge, Snow makes a comment which probably goes some distance in revealing the impulse behind the act. He told M. Théberge "I think I'm stuck with certain contradiction about not being "at home" in the movement of time because the future and the past are contents of the mind and you can't say the word "present" fast enough for it to fit into the present. One of the interesting things about a still photograph, in the same way a certain painting is the spect of fixing a moment in time which, of course, is also an illusion since like everything else its slowly changing. Experiencing this stopping of time seems to be a refreshment that is demanded occasionally and I suppose it's in the infinite. In that sense, it's slightly religious." Pierre Théberge, "Conversation with Michael Snow," in **Michael Snow** (Kunstmuseum Lazein, 1979), p. 20.
4. This reduction of time to the present is paralleled by the reduction of space to a two dimensional surface in most of Brakhage's work. Hence Snow when he restored the sense of past and future to film also restored deep space to the image.
5. In pointing out the plural character of the filmic objects, Snow's work has obvious affinities with that of Paul Shartis.
6. In the same conversation with Pierre Théberge cited above, Snow remarked "I am interested in trying to direct the spectator to an experience of an image as a "replaying"; as you put it of a past event but also with the present sense of critically seeing this representation that is involved with an image." Snow has thus acutely pointed out how his work moves back and forth between two kinds of perceptions.
7. Rimmer has, at times, veered towards abstraction, as in **Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper**, towards collage, as in **Square Inch Field**, and **Migration**. These works, however, are not generally considered, by those competent to judge, amongst Rimmer's most highly accomplished I believe that any measure of Rimmer's importance must take into account that at a time when other filmmakers around him were still basing their work on the principle of abstraction (consider for example, the work of Keith Rodan), Rimmer began exploring forms of cinema that could admit a greater diversity of types of imagery than merely the abstract.
8. Snow's **Wavelength** might appear to suggest such a movement, in its transition from a three-dimensional image to a two-dimensional one. This simple reading proves on more careful consideration to prove untenable, for the film form is also that a circle, as perhaps more accurately a spiral. The film ends with an image of waves which suggests a similar illusionistic depth to that of the opening imagery. At the end, however, our sense of this depth is altered by the recognition, educed by the film's structure as by the fact that we recognize that we are looking at a photograph on a wall, that the image's illusionistic deep space is conjoined with an essential flatness of the plane. Admittedly, Rimmer's **Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper** does have a teleological structure. I consider this film not to be typical of Rimmer's work as a mature filmmaker; indeed, I consider it to come at the time of his transition between his early and more derivative work and his later more individual work.
9. At the same time the minimalization of movement at the recorded filmic event also serves to focus attention on discerning what the film actually records, i.e. on its **legibility**. This splitting of attention between the recorded profilmic movement and the film's material substrate is another instance of that sort of dualism we found to be characteristic of the work of Snow.
10. It should be noted that Wieland has also used printed texts in such a way that the meaning of a text, and of its relation to the image, is ambiguous. Her film **1933**, for example, consists of a shot taken from a second storey window of the street below. This shot was looped and reprinted so that loop appears a total of ten times. The numeral "1933" appears on the first, fourth, seventh and tenth loop (i.e. every third floor, beginning with the first). The meaning of the numeral and of its relation to the street remains enigmatic and unclarified by many of the film's formal structures, including that system of its occurrence just described.
11. A significant exception is the use of the written text in Landow's work; Landow uses written text to explore semiotic dimensions of film.