

This essay first appeared in French in Jean-Michel Bouhours, Bruce Posner, and Isabelle Ribadeau Dumas, En marge de hollywood: Le première avant-garde cinématographique américaine 1893-1941. The manuscripts I was working on, referred to in the endnotes, were renamed to Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century; DADA, Surrealism, and the Cinematic Effect, and Cubism, Futurism, and Technologies of the Spirit: Spiritual Machines and the Cinematic Effect.

Peirce On Firstness and the Early American Avant-garde Cinema: Flux and Experience

One of the earliest references to the cinema in philosophical literature occurs in C.S. Peirce's Pragmatism lectures of 1903, where Peirce announced that a percept is "an image or moving picture or other exhibition." Peirce, one of the most American of philosophers, must have been struck by this analogy, for two years later, but still in the era of the silent film, he wrote in an unpublished manuscript, "a percept is much like a moving picture accompanied with sounds and other sensations." One might easily conclude that in likening perception to a moving picture, Peirce suggested that we are immediately aware of some mental image, and only indirectly aware of what these pictures represent. That inference would be mistaken – Peirce's interest in the analogy resulted from his recognition of the directness and forcefulness of the cinematic experience. Peirce remarked that, surveying his room, he actually sees the yellow chair with the green cushion – it is the actual chair itself that obtrudes upon one's gaze, and what one sees does not serve to represent anything else. "It makes no professions of any kind," Peirce writes. What is more, the percept compels acknowledgment: "the perceiver is aware of being compelled to perceive what he perceives." And again: "It acts upon us, it forces itself upon us; but it does not address the reason, nor *appeal* to anything for support." The impression presents itself as a quality of feeling, and that quality of feeling is not dependent on anything outside of the immediate perception. Peirce expresses this by saying a percept is a 'firstness.' Firstness, he writes "would be something *which is what is without reference [to] anything else* within it or without." Remarks Peirce made elsewhere confirm that what Peirce was pointing to when he compared experience to a motion picture was a quality of experience, for about experience he noted: "Stop to think of it and it has flow! . . . [It is] first, present, immediate, fresh, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious, and evanescent. Only remember that every description must be false to it." Consider how much like Brakhage's comments about "moving visual thinking" this is to get a sense of the role this idea of firstness has played in American arts and letters. Penetrating perception to its firstness, to where nothing external to sensation is brought to bear upon it, to where it imposes itself on us, without judgement or preconception – that is essentially the goal of much American vanguard art, including Brakhage's. If that task is impossible to achieve (and I think it is), then that impossibility is testimony to the utopian character of the American avant-garde.

Ralph Steiner hints at a such a utopianism at the beginning of *A Look at Laundry* (1971) in which he intimates that the goal of the film is to find beauty in the commonplace: "Some come here to this Island Inn to read or relax," he says. "Some come here to contemplate the landscape. Some to interpret the seascape. But who would think to look at the laundry behind the inn." He repeated this utopian theme at the beginning of *Look Park* (1973), when he announced that "The reflection of trees and sun may seem fantastic, but they are what anyone could see who looked closely." It is the connection between the purpose Steiner claimed for his films and a view of experience (and reality) such as Peirce proposed in the passages cited

above that I wish to consider in this note. But first recall how radical this view was. European modernism had its origins in a Neo-Platonic understanding of aesthetic form. The purpose of the work of art was to engender an aesthetic experience that elevates the mind above the everyday world, and it did so by encouraging the apprehension of pure forms. That largely explains the nature of the European artists' quest for abstraction. The early European modernists, by and large, remained implicitly committed to an ontology that included the belief that the mind seeks to apprehend the ideal, unchanging forms that underlie sensible objects, and that artists seek to realize the structures (purposes) of these ideal objects in the works they make. Anyone who has spend time with the paintings of Kasimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky Piet Mondrian, Hans Richter or Lazlo Moholgy-Nagy – the list could be enormously extended – are aware of these Neo-Platonic proclivities.

American thinkers and artists, on the contrary, have shown a remarkable faith in the mutable fact. Many readers will be familiar with Gertrude Stein's use of the participles to convey a sense of reality as composed not of fixed, enduring entities, but of beings that change. However, Stein's writing was also given over to conveying a sense of suchness of particulars. Donald Sutherland identified this strain in Stein's writing.

I want to treat in a very pedantic or scholastic way the fine distinctions that Gertrude Stein, as a student of philosophy and as a very committed intellectual, makes between *a* thing, and *anything*, or between *something* – as we would say in the vernacular, *something* that is really something – *anything*, or as we would say in the vernacular, something which is just anything.

I don't know whether anybody but professors of philosophy can be interested, at this time of day, in Duns Scotus, a thirteenth century philosopher. . . . The importance of Duns Scotus to us . . . is in his theory of *species specialissima*, or the terminal entity of any immediate phenomenon, the peculiar character of which, in unique conditions of space and time, cannot be dissolved away into its component general forms, such as yellow, small, alive animal, and so on, or its inclusion is not a class, such as Bee. Scotus called, or presumably he did, this very individual character of specific quality of any concrete phenomenon, its *ecceitas* – or its there-it-is-ness – or again it *haecceitas*, its this-here-ness. This insistence on the immediate individual thing as a final reality, as final as general ideas, or even the featureless reality of Being Absolute of Being itself, is if you like a traditional problem, but I think it has never been so real in experience in the twentieth century [or, as Stein would say, the American century].

There is a connection between Stein's interest in what Duns Scotus calls *haecceitas* and Peirce's ideas on perception and experience. Here is another passage from Peirce:

Looking out of my window this lovely spring morning I see an azalea in full bloom. No, No! I do not see that; though that is the only way I can describe what I see. *That* is a proposition, a sentence, a fact; but what I perceive is not a proposition, sentence, fact, but only an image, which I make intelligible by statement of fact. This statement is abstract; but what I see is concrete. I perform an abduction when I [so much as] express in a sentence anything I see. The truth is that the whole fabric of our knowledge is one matted felt of pure hypothesis confirmed

and refined by induction.

Perceiving an object, Peirce asserted, depends on hypothetical inference (Peirce refers to it as “abduction”) – guessing is at the centre of all seeing, all knowing.

But before abduction has been performed on experience, there is the primal experience as a firstness. Peirce may not have believed that it was possible to retrieve the quality of the manifold of sensation before abduction was performed on raw experience, but many American artists (including artists working in the cinema) have acknowledged that retrieval as their goal and at the same have confessed to a longing to escape into pure experience, beyond experience as we usually know it, into experience as a Firstness. We must demand to know why they have cleaved to this utopian aspiration.

Many American artists have proposed that establishing an intimate and direct relation with what is immediate and local has redemptory potentials. This notion traces its provenance back to Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is he who framed the proposition that the exemplary artist is the artist who is most thoroughly open to reality, and can respond to its vicissitudes without pre-conceptions.

. . . These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more; in the leafless root there is no less. Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike. But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.

A conviction in the salutary results of getting in touch with reality in itself was the basis of Emerson’s advocacy of a distinctively American art. Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists proclaimed that the American Republic of the Imagination would be one in which each individual would realize him- or herself through a self-reliance that involves nothing less than plumbing the depth of the self until one would discover the divine presence within. That doctrine became the principal item of the polity’s founding dogma. Thus the famous “Divinity School Address” casts the “appropriated and formal” language of catechismal instruction, the language that Europe taught America, as the enemy of inspiration, and condemns it for turning Americans away from the Supreme Spirit that dwells within. The civilized world impedes efforts to contact the self; withdrawing into the embrace of nature assists them: this proposition is the basis for the portrayal of humans’ relationship with the natural world as redemptive, a key theme of both the American avant-garde and the American documentary film. It is also the ground for the belief in the redemptive power of direct contact with the given thing, which one discovers anew once the deadening effects of historically induced preconceptions have been set aside.

For Emerson, each element is a microcosm of the whole (as each person is a reflection of the entirety of humanity).

the universe is represented in every one of its particles. Every thing in nature contains all the powers of nature. . . . Each new form repeats not only the main

character of the type, but part for part all the details, all the aims, furtherances, hindrances, energies and whole system of every other. Every occupation, trade, art, transaction, is a compend of the world and a correlative of every other. Each one is an entire emblem of human life; of its good and ill, its trials, its enemies, its course and its end. And each one must somehow accommodate the whole man and recite all his destiny. CHECKED CHECKED

William Carlos Williams also celebrated local realities. This is in part what motivated him to expound his poetics of direct perception, which he encapsulated in his famous slogan, "No ideas but in things." Williams, too, believed that one must overcome the deleterious effects of history in order to open oneself to the exact condition of the local given thing. His essay on Edgar Allan Poe, in the tellingly entitled "*In the American Grain*," asserts

The local causes shaping Poe's genius were two in character: the necessity for a fresh beginning, backed by a native vigor of extraordinary proportions, — with the corollary, that all "colonial imitation" must be swept aside. This was the conscious force which rose in Poe as innumerable timeless insights resulting, by his genius, in firm statements on the character of form, profusely illustrated by his practices; and, *second* the immediate effect of the locality upon the first, upon his nascent impulses, upon his original thrusts; tormenting the depths into a surface of bizarre designs by which he's known and which are *not at all* the major point in question. . . .

The strong sense of a beginning in Poe is in *no one* else before him. What he says, being thoroughly local in origin, has some chance of being universal in application, . . . Made to fit a *place* it will have that actual quality of *things* anti-metaphysical. . . . Poe conceived the possibility, the sullen, volcanic inevitability of the *place*. He was willing to go down and wrestle with its conditions, using every tool. CHECKED CHECKED

Williams suggests that being open to immediate reality puts one in touch with something unique, both in the world and in oneself, but above all with something distinctive in local reality. He states in *Spring and All*, "There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world"; and so the reader never knows "and never dares to know . . . what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested. . . . To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live" is the task of an artist. The phenomenology of time consciousness that Williams adumbrates here resembles ideas that William James, Gertrude Stein and Stan Brakhage have offered

The composer John Cage took great interest in the New England Transcendentalists, and especially in Emerson and Thoreau. Under their influence, partly, he developed his own ideas about revealing the given directly, and without imposition. In *Silence*, a statement of his aesthetic credo, he wrote

. . . [O]ne may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments. . . . And what is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeful

purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life — not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord. CHECKED CHECKED

Many American artists have associated their interest in direct perception with the belief that language imposes the deadening weight of tradition on experience, and only the raw experience of the natural body has an authentic relationship to the immediate conditions of living. This notion led artists and thinkers to stress the individual, autonomous existent — to the belief that only individual sensations and the connections between them are real, to the uncompromising positivism that Leonard B. Meyer called “radical empiricism” or “transcendental particularism.”

Gertrude Stein, too, committed herself to a version of transcendental particularism. She attempted to distance herself from all those preconceptions that made up the “mind of Europe” which Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot so eagerly adopted. Like her predecessor Ralph Waldo Emerson, her contemporary William Carlos Williams, and her successor, John Cage, Stein traced the particular virtue of America back to the Americans' openness to the specificity of the concrete particular in all its uniqueness.

What accounts for this extraordinary interest in particulars? The idea of the importance of particular results partly from a conception of the beneficence of nature, and the salutary effects of establishing an intimate relation with nature. But that only raises the question why the relation between the self and nature is such that an immediate relation with nature has a salutary effect on the self. And beyond its salutary effects for the self, there is another reason for the American interest in establishing the immediate relation to reality, one that has much to tell us about the appeal the cinema had for American vanguard artists. To understand reason, we must acknowledge that there is a deep indeterminacy in the conception of direct, immediate perception this tradition holds, an indeterminacy that results from the conception's taking two forms: a realist metaphysics that asserts that only particulars are out there, in the world, and the second a phenomenalism which asserts that all that we know to be real is the individual sensation. A similar oscillation between epistemological realism and phenomenalism characterizes Stan Brakhage's public statements about his films, for he sometimes asserts that such photographed films as the *Visions in Meditation* series present the beauty of created reality, while at other times he describes his film as presenting the contents of consciousness or, more accurately, equivalents to the contents of consciousness. A similar oscillation can be found among artists as various as Gertrude Stein, Ralph Steiner and Jim Davis, just to name a few.

The two positions distinguish themselves on the issue of whether what is sensed is really extra-mental: what I am calling the realist position maintains that what is sensed is extra-mental, while what I call the phenomenalist position maintains that it is not. Although the realist and phenomenalist doctrines are strictly incompatible, several thinkers nonetheless have sometimes propounded one and sometimes the other, and have vacillated between the positions, seemingly without recognizing their incompatibility. This is true of no less a thinker than William James; and his status as an exemplary American thinker and a founder of American's paradigmatic philosophy makes it worthwhile to consider how this indeterminacy expressed itself in his work.

James adopted a phenomenalist position when he stated

Berkeley's criticism of “matter” was consequently absolute pragmatistic. Matter is

known as our sensations of colour, figure, hardness, and the like. They are the cash value of the term. . . . These sensations are then its meaning.

On the other hand, in Chapter 5 of *Pragmatism*, in “Professor Hébert on Pragmatism” (from *The Meaning of Truth*), and throughout *The Principles of Psychology*, James writes as though the reality with which we are acquainted is composed of ordinary physical objects. For example, he asserts a realist position in the following passages:

As a pragmatist I have . . . carefully posited “reality” *ab initio*, and . . . throughout my whole discussion, I remain an epistemological realist.

I am . . . postulating here a standing reality independent of the idea that knows it.

A similar indeterminacy characterizes Charles Olson’s poetics. Olson sometimes discussed his poetics as a poetics of “objectism,” thereby privileging the presentation of the object before the “lyrical ego” has imposed upon it. However, in “Projective Verse,” Olson proposed that a poem is composed of perceptions, each of which leads immediately and directly to the next. He also likened this restlessness, this activity to something that he cryptically referred to as “the process of the thing” and he related this process to “energy,” claiming that is energy by which form is “accomplished.” The poet’s task is to get into the poem the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place.”

Olson generally views reality as field in which entities are hurrying into and out of existence, through the process of concrescence. This flux is neither exclusively physical, nor exclusively mental but (at least potentially) both. The artist is just a sentient, conscious part of that “field.” The poet’s task is to create a poetic form that is charged with the energy equivalent to that originally impacted on the poet, in order that the energy might be transmitted to the reader, who will then have equivalent experiences. Thus, the poet must get in touch with reality, to perceive the dynamics of the field immediately, thoroughly and completely – hence Olson’s remark that “some several influences” operate simultaneously on the poet, who must be open to them all, and Brakhage’s remark in *Metaphors on Vision* that the filmmaker must plumb the depths of all visual influences.

Olson’s remarks present two key ideas, that reality is dynamic and that artists should strive to present (or to provoke the experience of) the immediate object or sensation at hand. The conjunction of these two ideas I suggest, is characteristic of a certain tradition in American vanguard art, and prevalent in the early American cinema – indeed, the interaction of those two beliefs goes a long way in explaining what drew American artists to the cinema in the first decades of the twentieth century. This proposition also goes a long way in explaining why an inconsistency regarding the status of perception can be found in the work of thinkers whom we would not expect to find embroiled in such egregious contradiction: a deeper concern preoccupied them, one that neither a realist nor a phenomenalist metaphysic could satisfy. Both realism and phenomenism were partial but inadequate statements of the deeper metaphysics that has interested American artists, and that is a metaphysics of process..

Still, the connection between the belief that reality is fundamentally dynamic and an advocacy of concentrating attention on the suchness of particulars is difficult to fathom, and we shall have to spend some time with it. One of the earliest and richest pieces of writing to conjoin the idea that reality is dynamic with a stress on direct immediate contact reality was William James’ *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. James’ philosophy begins with a conception of the

subject: the subject, he avers, is a centre of interests, desires, goals, volition. Like most thinkers of his time, James understood the subject through an input-output model; the input takes the form of sensation which James famously described as “buzzing, blooming confusion.” The flux of sensation is simply chaotic, James stated – the welter of sensations do not make up a coherent whole. “The strains of my voice, the lights and shades inside the room and out, the murmur of the wind, the ticking of the clock, the various organic feelings you may happen individually to possess, do these make up a whole?” James asked. He answered that they do not constitute an intelligible whole – all that unites them is that they are contemporaneous. However, subjects’ interests allow them to sort out this confusion, drawing them to this element, which they thereby select for inclusion in the experiences that make up the stream of consciousness, but not to that one. By selecting certain sensations and disregarding others, and by associating the selected experiences with past experiences, the subject is able to organize experience and impose an interpretation on it.

Experiencers attend selectively to the welter of sensory inputs that impinge upon them, and the selection they make reflects their interests; accordingly the reality they experience (organize) is pragmatic reality shaped as the stream of consciousness becomes conceptualized, or “intellectualized” as James put it. Subjects do not perceive reality in a pure, uncategorized form.

When we talk of “reality” independent of human thinking, then, it seems a thing very hard to find. It reduces to the notion of what is just entering into experience, and yet to be named, or else to some imagined aboriginal presence in experience, before any belief about the presence had arisen, before any human conception had been applied. It is what is absolutely dumb and evanescent, the merely ideal limits of our minds. We may glimpse it, but we never grasp it; what we grasp is always some substitute for it which previous human thinking has peptonized and cooked for our consumption.

Thus we see that James disavowed the possibility of ever apprehending, pure, uncategorized reality. This left him in a position of radical doubt, for that disavowal implied that no abstract knowledge – knowledge of the sort we can express in a proposition – is true for more than an instant. No sooner do we grasp something than it is gone, and what we thought we knew is no more.

This radical scepticism seems to have troubled many American artists, just as it troubled many American thinkers. This radical doubt prompted artists to conceive that their role is to present a “glimpse” of the primordial reality-in-flux, before the mind has imposed categories upon it. Brakhage, for example, testifies to his efforts to convey “what is just entering into experience, and [is] yet to be named, or else to some imagined aboriginal presence in experience.” The imagery of water that Brakhage has created for *Made Manifest*, *The Child’s Garden and Serious Sea*, *The Mammals of Victoria*, and *The God of Day Has Gone Down Upon Him*, also suggest that reality/experience is flux, as does the quick cutting, the imagery of flow and the manipulation of the anamorphic lens in *Dog Star Man*. But Brakhage is not alone in this, nor was he the first. Consider the subjects of Steiner’s *H₂O* and *Surf and Seaweed*, the dynamism of the machinery that interested him in *Mechanical Principles*, the passing configurations that interest him in *A Look at Laundry* – all suggest flux, and perhaps even the idea that reality is flux. For that matter, the steam and fog and passing people in Strand and

Sheeler's *Manhatta* suggest the same. One could go on.

James considered experience to be what is ultimately real, and experience is constant flux. In a seminal paper of 1884 entitled "On some omissions of introspective psychology," James offered a criticism of "orthodox" empiricism for reducing experience to a succession of fixed and distinct entities, substantive elements (ideas, images, percepts, sensations) that can be convened before the court of introspective attention and examined. James criticized this punctate, discontinuous view of experience for overlooking and falsifying "immense tracts of our inner life," and for being completely at odds with the flowing, stream-like quality of consciousness. Most thinkers have taken experience to be made up of fixed entities; however, James pointed out, not all that belongs to experience is fixed. Experience is as much flux as is fixity, James averred; experience is much constituted of transitions and relations as it is of the fixed ideas and stable images on which the traditional empiricists have focused:

. . .When we take a rapid general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness . . . our mental life, like a bird's life, seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings . . .The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest...

Consciousness is a continuity of experienced relations – this assertion is the heart of James' radical empiricism. Radical empiricism cannot ignore the flux in experience in favour of the fixed entities, as traditional empiricism has, James continued: "For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system."

The idea of the continuity of reality, revealed in experience of the continuous transition between experienced relations, is the ground of James metaphysics. ". . . continuous transition is one sort of a conjunctive relation; and to be a radical empiricist means to hold fast to this conjunctive relation of all others, for this is the strategic point, the position through which, if a hole be made, all the corruptions of dialectics and all the metaphysical fictions pour into philosophy," James wrote.

James' philosophy (like those of all process we have considered), is a monistic philosophy. This dynamic reality is the only reality. James (like most of the other process philosophers we have mentioned) combatted the reified conception of consciousness which the Cartesian philosophy had finally produced. That reified notion of consciousness considered that the phenomena that enter consciousness as content and that consciousness itself is simply the manifold within which the phenomena of consciousness occur. James wanted to deny that consciousness could be something different from its content, and it was to that end that James articulated his doctrine of "pure experience." That doctrine denied that consciousness stands for an entity, that "that there is any "aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which our material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made." In place of this substantial dualism, James (like many process philosophers) proposed a monism of pure experience. There is, James says, "only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and...we call that stuff 'pure experience'."

James' views on perceptual knowledge rehearse a position that has been common among vanguard artists in America. When knowing is perceptual, the relation between

experiences is that of identity. "The mind enjoys direct 'acquaintance' with a present object," James wrote, giving voice to a belief that many American artists have articulated. To know is to experience directly, to experience immediately, is to experience purely. There is in fact in direct perception no separation of knower and known, in fact no knower and no known – there is only experience. This answers the question about the salutariness of direct experience we posed earlier – the immediate relation with nature has salutary effects for the self because what the mind knows in immediate experience is itself (in, perhaps, another of its forms).

This monistic process philosophy remained a constant of James philosophy; what James could not settle upon, however, is the character of that stuff. The reason for this strain of indeterminacy in American thought has shown regarding the status of particulars is that the character of the one primal stuff defies our usual categories, for it does no good to ask whether it is mental or physical, for it is in one sense both, in another sense neither. Whether to adopt a phenomenalist or a realist metaphysics is decided by how one answers the question whether the character of this stuff is more like what we understand the contents of the mind to be or more like what we understand the contents of the physical world to be; for philosopher like James or the other monists of process that we mentioned, that question is meaningless. But, of course, it is also difficult to answer the question whether the contents of Ralph Steiner's *H₂O* or *Look Park*, of Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man*, of Gertude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, of Jim Davis' *Energies*, or for that matter, of Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* or Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers" represent perceptions or objective reality. This is a very broad, and important current in American arts and letters – and it helps account for the appeal that film had to American arts: From not long after its invention, for the contents of film equally seem to hover between the status of an object and the status of a mental image.

Implicit in the work in this current of American art and thought is the neutral monist conception of reality on which everything, from stones to ideas and impressions, is composed of the same "stuff."; indeed, in the writings of James and Peirce this neutral becomes explicit. The usual reason for adopting the position of neutral monism is that it does away with the problem of dualism, which sees human consciousness as isolated from nature. Thus, in "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," that extraordinary fantasia on the historical process that takes history as a thermodynamical system, Henry Adams writes of ether as an "undifferentiated substance supporting matter and mind alike." This was neutral monism's appeal to Emerson, too, to take just one other example. The belief that all reality, mental and physical alike, are constituted by energy exchanges amongst the basic "particles" (Emerson's "atoms") of reality also founds the belief that the world is constituted not of stable, enduring objects, but of events (a conception of reality that is echoed in Adam's conception of history as a thermodynamic system)..

This monism of process maintains no division of reality into subject and object, knower and known. In the immediacy of a given pure experience there is no distinction between mind and object. That division only occurs – is only *added to* experience – when a moment of experience is abstracted from the continuous flux and retrospectively considered in the context of various relations, relations that are external to a given experience taken in itself but intrinsic to experience taken as a general flow. James wrote "Does consciousness exist?"

Experience, I believe, has no such inner duplicity; and the separation of it into consciousness and content comes not by way of subtraction, but by way of addition – the addition, to a given concrete piece of it, of other sets of experiences, in connection with which severally its use or function may be of two

different kinds...a given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, play(s) the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of 'consciousness'; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective 'content.' In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing. And, since it can figure in both groups simultaneously we have every right to speak of it as subjective and objective both at once...dualism...is still preserved in this account, but reinterpreted...(as) an affair of relations...outside, not inside the single experience considered..."

Charles Sanders Peirce had formulated a similar position even before James:

the coherence of an idea with experience in general does not depend at all upon its being actually present to the mind all the time. But it is clear that when Berkeley says that reality consists in the connection of experience, he is simply using the word reality in a sense of his own. That an object's independence of our thought about it is constituted by its connection with experience in general, he has never conceived.

This process metaphysic provides Emerson with yet another justification for advocating close attention to the immediate particular, for in a world in which everything changes moment by moment, inherited knowledge (and, for that matter, memory), is of little use. The only tutor we can employ is the immediately present:

Life is a series of surprises. We do not guess to-day the mood, the pleasure, the power of to-morrow, when we are building up our being. Of lower states, of acts of routine and sense, we can tell somewhat; but the masterpieces of God, the total growths and universal movements of the soul, he hideth; they are incalculable. I can know that truth is divine and helpful; but how it shall help me I can have no guess, for *so to be* is the sole inlet of *so to know*. The new position of the advancing has all the powers of the old, yet has them all new. It carries in its bosom all the energies of the past, yet is itself an exhalation of the morning. I cast away in this new moment all my once hoarded knowledge, as vacant and vain. Now for the first time seem I to know any thing rightly.

From this comes a thrust to expel anticipation and recollection from our experience of an artwork, to convert aesthetic temporality into an immediate, continuous present. This is an aspect of both Stan Brakhage and Gertrude Stein's work. But before either, there was Emerson.

. . . Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping if it were not. God delights to isolate us every day, and hide from us the past and the future. We would look about us, but with grand politeness he draws down before us an impenetrable screen of purest sky, and another behind us of purest sky. 'You will not remember,' he seems to say, 'and you will not expect.' All good conversation, manners and actions come from a spontaneity which forgets usages and makes the moment great. Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such; and the chemical and ethereal agents are undulatory and alternate; and the mind

goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits.

Not only does Emerson here expound the value of living in the immediate present, with no regard for past or future (of a mental state in which all experience is consolidated in the present, in the acts of perception and, perhaps, of apperception, free of any taint of retention or expectation), but he also connects that idea with spontaneity. A work of art imitates nature in the manner of its operation, and “nature hates calculation.” Emerson proposed that artworks must come into being through a similarly saltatory and impulsive manner, and even the radical idea that artworks could emerge through chance. Emerson’s arguments for the aesthetic role of chance (which have parallels in C.S. Peirce’s tychism) were among the earliest formulated, and had an influence on Cage.

Emerson extended his ideas about flux to the self as well. We are continually arriving at a new self, and leaving behind the self that existed a moment before. But this is not to say that the self is never fully realized. Quite the contrary: what Emerson implies is that each state of the self is final, perfected. If it has no issue, it is because what ever is final, whatever is perfected, cannot produce a successor that would be anything but deficient when compared with itself.

The self is flux, but always taken by surprise. With every new experience, the self that formerly was dies and another self is born. But the experience of each moment is complete and perfect in itself. Consider how well this passage from Emerson describes the sense of the continually altering self which a Brakhage film elicits.

Stanley Cavell’s writings on Emerson reveal how closely the contours of his thought match that of James. Cavell suggests that what animates Emerson’s thought is a disquietude over the violence done to the ordinary by refusing or forcing its everyday order, and in this likens his thought to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s. The impulse to refuse the ordinary is a form of violence towards the everyday. Emerson’s poetics, like Olson’s, offered a conception of artistic form which does not accord it the status of a transcendental, as European modernism generally did. This is an enormous contribution both to aesthetic theory and to artmaking. For Emerson, artistic form is the result of the activity of the field (Emerson’s “world”) acting on the maker, who is thereby impelled to action, and those actions, in their turn, leave a trace in the field (the “world”) that originally impelled them. The shape of this trace we call “artistic form.” Action painters, for example, open themselves to circumambient influences, and these influences impel them to make some gesture or another, and the gesture leaves its trace on the canvas. The skein of paint on the canvas make the painter’s actions manifest, and the painter’s actions, in their turn, make manifest the influences that operated on the painter. At no point does this circuit of exchange break with the world of matter/consciousness, so the form of the work does not accede to the status of transcendental. A work of art imitates nature in the manner of its operation (as John Cage, following D.T. Suzuki used to say), and its form never rises above nature.

This anti-Platonic conception of an artwork, the idea that the form of an art work does not rise above nature, helps explain the status of “the image” in Olson’s work, and certainly, also in the American vanguard tradition we are exploring. Consider in this connection the films of Dwinell Grant, Jim Davis or Mary Ellen Bute. One of the main effects of Olson’s push was to bring the image down from the Platonic heavens, and use it as a dynamic element, like any other force in reality. Rather than seeking for eternal forms, he strived to convey a “point by point vividness.” “Every moment of life is an attempt to come to life,” Olson taught. We must open ourselves to the throb of life that every moment of experience conveys. Openness to the particularities of the actual object or actual event is redemptory, Olson, too, taught.

The non-transcendental conception of form constitutes the basis for the alliance between the cinematic avant-garde and the documentary cinema. Brakhage's *oeuvre* provides the most compelling example of an artist whose vanguard aspirations are rooted in beliefs about the value of the document. Consider, for example, the commitment to exploring dailiness that combines an interest in exploring the formal qualities of intensified perception and thoroughgoing documental commitment to careful observation of everyday reality.

Evidences of the conjunction of the ideal of immediacy with the idea of flux can be found throughout the early American avant-garde cinema. It is evident in the documentarism of Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta*, an achievement in close observation (which also characterizes both Strand's photographs and Sheeler's paintings) – a work that time and again thwarts its tendency towards formalization by the inclusion of dynamic and unpredictable forms such as puffs of vapour. This American tradition of close observation is also evident in the documentarism of many of the films of this program – as it is in the documentarism of Charles Olson and Stan Brakhage and in Maya Deren's advocacy of the realism of the cinematographic image. Deren in fact was an early champion of the importance of film's character as a recording process, a feature she believed was so fundamental to the medium that the film artist, she argued, should not alter the spatial field that is built into the recording apparatus. But she did not argue that film should only be a recording medium: The creative dimension of film, she asserted, lies in the handling of time, and one of the creative potentials available to the filmmaker is that of creating vertical temporal structures – structures that are very like the continuous present we alluded to above in connection with James, Stein and Brakhage. We must also note, in this connection the allegorization of the actual, in such films as Watson and Webber's *Lot in Sodom* (1933), which "documents," in allegorical fashion, the eruption of a homoerotic relationship into Watson's world.

But it is not just in the documentarist proclivities of this strain of the American avant-garde that this view of reality finds expression. It is evident too in the dynamics of Dwinell Grant's abstractions, which are literally outerings of the energetics of process. It is evident in Mary Ellen Bute's oscilloscope creations in *Abstronic* (1954) and *Mood Contrasts* (1956), or even in ever-changing shapes, colors, forms, vapors, illuminations of her earlier work, *Pastorale* (1953). It is compellingly evident in Jim Davis "abstraction," which – as works such as *Jersey Spring* (1946/53) reveal – he understood as creations of the same energy that drives reality. Grant, Davis, Brakhage all claim to be revealing about actual reality – whether of the process of nature or of thought processes. Sara Kathryn Arledge's film *Introspection* suggests something similar.

Many American filmmakers attempt to convey to us the mutable fact – or, more often, the energy of the primal process that engenders the fact. On the other hand, European avant-garde filmmakers of the same period for the most part claimed to presenting analogues of higher reality. Like Oscar Fischinger, many of the pioneer avant-garde filmmakers presumed that the cinema's musical dynamics could offer analogues of a higher domain. Many American avant-garde filmmakers, on the other hand, have been concerned with presenting equivalents of energetics or thought processes. What we see on screen in this strain of the American avant-garde does not refer to a higher occult reality through a symbolism of dynamic form (as it does say in Oscar Fischinger's work); rather it presents the energy that moves things, either directly, (as in Dwinell Grant and Jim Davis' work and Mary Ellen Bute's oscilloscope creations) or indirectly, through the evidence of what those energies move (consider Ralph Steiner's work in this light). Or, consider the contrast between the roles of *hasard objectif* in Joseph Cornell's cinematic Surrealism (in, for example, *Aviary*, *Centuries of June* and *Nymphlight*) and that of

say, Dali /Buñuel *An Andalusian Dog* or Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman*.

But the clearest evidence perhaps is found in the work of Ralph Steiner. Steiner's *H₂O* presents a dynamic image of water in much the same way that Brakhage's *Made Manifest* does, as an image of flux. Steiner returned to that image of flux in a later film, *Surf and Seaweed* (1940). That interest in establishing a direct relation with the mutable fact explains the continuity of Steiner's *oeuvre* – for it would be hard to understand what relation *H₂O* has to *Surf and Seaweed* or Steiner's wonderful book of photographs, *In Pursuit of Clouds* – for neither gives any interest in transcending particularity. Accepting that what drives his career is the desire announced at the beginning of *A Look at Laundry* (1971), that beauty (read “an ecstatic revelation of the energetics of flux”) can be discovered in the commonplace, throws the unity of Steiner's *oeuvre* into high relief. *Surf and Seaweed* is a reflection on what we now refer to as “chaotic dynamics” (a field that almost certainly would have interested Jim Davis as well), for it demonstrates that the dynamics (the “flux”) of intricate forms is characterized by a complexity that completely individuates each moment – each individual element – so, while the overall behaviour of the various instances are predicable, the details of each individual configuration are unpredictable, and therefore fascinating. (Thus, for example, as the waves roll towards us, the pattern of foam of each individual wave is utterly unique, and the speed of movements that carries the seaweed this way or that fluctuates widely.) In *Hurray for Light*, he returned to his interest in chaotic dynamics.

One could, and should, go on to describe in detail how notions about the importance of establishing an immediate relation with reality-in-flux helped shape many of the key works in the early avant-garde film. Unfortunately, I have not space enough to do so. But I want to point out, in concluding, three historiographic consequences of recognizing the existence of a distinctive American tradition. First, the American avant-garde film of the 1920s and 1930s is often disparaged as a pale shadow of the early European experimental film – either, as in the case of Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta* as derivative “impressionist film” or, of *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Lot in Sodom* of German Expressionist film, or in *The Life and Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra*, as a sort of Hollywoodized cross-breeding of the Surrealist film and the Constructivist film. But if this concern with establishing a direct relation to the mutable fact and this non-transcendental conception of form distinguishes early American modernism from early European modernism as I claim, and if the early American and European avant-garde films are the products of their respective modernism, then the early American avant-garde film must be appreciated in its own terms, and for its own merits, and not as an imitation of the European film. Second, if there is a central tradition in American avant-garde film that has been linked by an aesthetic of transcendental particularism and non-transcendental conception of form, and if American avant-garde films of the twenties and thirties exemplify this aesthetic as much as does the post-1942 American avant-garde cinema, then the idea that the American cinema emerged virtually *ex nihilo* becomes suspect. The notion of transcendental particularism, and its relation to the conception of reality as flux, allow us to understand what the post-1942 avant-garde filmmaking owes the earlier American tradition of avant-garde filmmaking. Third, if a central strain of the American avant-garde is concerned with close scrutiny of particulars, it is understandable that some figures (e.g., Ralph Steiner) would move back and forth between so-called “experimental” filmmaking and documentary filmmaking and that the continuities between the “experimental” filmmaking of the 1920s, the independent, documentary filmmaking of the 1930s, and “experimental” filmmaking after 1942 are very strong.

