Unpublished article

Emerson, Transcendental Particularism, and The New American Cinema

R. Bruce Elder

By 1930, modernism already had long history; and the modernist narrative of artistic advances had become rather well established. The writings that advocates of modernism after 1930 — of Alfred Barr (the curator of New York City's influential Museum of Modern Art), Michel Seuphor, Albert Barr, and (perhaps most important of all) the erstwhile Trotskyite Clement Greenberg — are always confident, briskly reasoned works, rich in typological distinction and genealogical derivation (exemplified in Albert Barr's tree diagram of the derivation of modern artistic styles), as the writings of thinkers who have inherited a rich and distinctive legacy so often are. The genealogies of Greenberg and Barr were based in the concept of the sytle. Both critics assumed style to be a feature of an artwork's surface, available to the eye; and each believed, first, that there was evolution in the arts (at least over relatively short durations), and that the course of this evolution could be described through charting the developments of style, each of which was sufficiently different from its predecessors as to mark a new phase in the artistic development. This categorical habit of thought extended to their deliberations on the relation between the arts: both Barr and Greenberg drew sharp boundaries around the each of the media and maintained that each should refrain from overstepping their enclosures and intruding on the domains of adjacent media. There was not much doubt about the identity of the various media or of the phases in the evolution of modern art.

The idea exemplified in Alfred Barr's tree diagram of the genealogy of modern artist has elicited much debate. The foremost expositor of the art critical/art historical ideas that underlay Barr's diagram was formidable Clement Greenberg. The proposition that founded Clement Greenberg's theses on art history twas that around the middle of the nineteenth century, the major art came under a pressure that had not previously been exerted on them, from the development of mass culture. For the first time in their history they were threatened with being assimilated to entertainment. Their response was to claim for themselves the capacity to engender an experience that could not be obtained from any other kind of activity and that is valuable in itself (and not as means to another, greater good).

Greenberg's ideas on this matter were greatly influenced by Immanuel Kant, ideas presented in the companion volume, *Image, Form and Function in Twentieth Century Painting and Film*. Kant had asserted that what distinguished aesthetic experience from all other sorts of experience is that aesthetic experience is the experience of *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck* — purposefulness without purpose. The gist of what Kant means by this is that when we experience a work of art aesthetically we are cognizant (and Kant is quite expansive on the issues relate to the peculiar features of that cognition) that all the various elements of the work are mutually adapted to one another and to the overarching form they all subserve; yet this overar ching form is fitted in no way to meeting are ordinary interests—it cannot instruct us (or serve any other function), it can only delight us. The experience of the mutual adaptedness of each element of work to all the others and to the whole they all subserve—the experience of *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*—is an experience of form. What distinguishes our experience of an artwork from our experience of any other object is that it is a pure experience of form.

Greenberg adopted this Kantian proposition, and style served for him much the same role that the concept of mutual adaption had played in Kant's aesthetics. Greenberg's interests however focused on the question of what determined the form of work, if it was fidelity to extra-aesthetic entity or process. His answer was the form follows from the material properties of the medium in which it is realized. Since each aesthetic medium has distinctive properties, the forces that shape the forms appropriate to each particular medium will differ; as so will the

resulting forms. Thus Greenberg came to the conclusion

> Each art, as it turned had to effect this demonstration on its own account. What had to be exhibited and made explicit was that which was unique and irreducible not only in art in general but also in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself. By doing this, each art would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of this all the more secure.
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> It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to elimate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of every other art. Thereby each art would be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independnce. "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.

The route towards self-definition, as Greenberg charted it, was a *via negativa*: each art form was to define itself in the first first place against the arts, as being not like them. Painting, for example, was to become itself by distinguishing itself from drawing and from sculpture. And, in the second place, each form was identify its proper by discarding whatever could be discarded, until a ineliminable, irreducible essence was all that remained.

A century was devoted to this progressive reduction. At last, by the time American-type painting emerged, in the 1940s, painting had identified its irreducible essence

> It has been established by now, it would seem, that the irreducitibility of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delination of flatness. In other words, the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienceds as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a *successful* one.

Michael Fried has written a trenchant critique of Greenberg's massively influential historigraphic principles; and they are now all but dismantled. Yet for almost a generation — the generation that came into its own just as the artistic movement that this the subject of this chapter was getting under way—these principles commanded the allegiance of many of the the most trenchant thinkers on advanced.

A second principle that underlay Albert Barr's tree diagram was just as persuasive — so pervasive that to this day it has not lost its grip. This is the assertion that significance of visual art work lies entirely in its appearance, that its value us wholly presented to us, to be apprehended in sensory experience.

These ideas about the purity and authority of experience had antecedents in New England Transcendentalism. Many the New England Transcendentalists, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, proposed that American art had distinctive characteristics. Consider Emerson's "The American Scholar"—near the beginning, Emerson speculates that

> Perhaps the time is already come when . . . the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests.

Near the end, he offers his listeners/readers this call to action:

> We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. . . . The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for any but the decorous and the complaisant. . . . What is the remedy? . . . We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defence and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.

Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists expounded an essentially Gnostic doctrine, 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 (spark) 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, was the enemy of inspiration, and was responsible for turning Americans away from the Supreme Spirit that dwells within.

To counter the pernicious effects of second-hand learning, Emerson offered the remedy of attending to immediate experience; immediate experience, he averred, is the key to acquiring insight in the mystery. Hence:

> Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean, and follow the Past and the Distant. The soul created the arts wherever they have flourished. It was in his own mind that the artist sought his model. It was an application of his own thought to the thing to be done and the conditions to be observed. And why need we copy the Doric or the Gothic model? Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought and quaint expression are as near to us as to any, and if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also.
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> Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession. That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. No man yet knows what it is, nor can, till that person has exhibited it. Where is the master who could have taught Shakspeare [*sic*]? . . . Every great man is a unique. The Scipionism of

> Scipio is precisely that part he could not borrow. Shakspeare will never be made by the study of Shakspeare. . . . Abide in the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart, and thou shalt reproduce the Foreworld again.

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 as a key theme of both the American avant-garde and the American documentary film. It is also the ground for the idea of 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.

Thus William Carlos Williams' celebration of the local realities is among the features of his oeuvre that made it a model for poets of the 1960s and 1970s. 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, which, because reality is flux (a Parmenidean conviction that Williams shared with Emerson), is made new with every passing instant. 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 or 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. . . .
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> 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.
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> . . . [H]e is the diametric opposite of Longfellow — to say the least. But Longfellow was the apotheosis of all that had preceded him in America, to this extent, that he brought over the *most* from "the other side." In "*Longfellow and Other Plagiarists*," Poe looses [sic] himself to the full upon them. But what had they done? No more surely than five hundred architects are constantly practicing. Longfellow did it without genius, perhaps, but he did no more and no less than to bring the tower of the Seville Cathedral to Madison Square. . . .
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> 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. . . . His greatness is in that he turned his back and faced inland, to originality, with the identical gesture of a Boone.

Thus Williams connects the idea of being open to immediate reality with American particularist convictions.

Most know that the composer John Cage took great interest in the New England Transcendentalists, and especially in Emerson and Thoreau. So it should not be surprising that he developed similar ideas. In *Silence*, his famous 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.

Many 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, unformed experience of the natural body has an authentic relationship to the immediate conditions of living (i.e., related to what, in Williams' sense of the word, is "local"). Concern with direct perception also leads to the stress on the individual, autonomous existent and denial of the reality of relationships — to the belief that only individual sensations and the connections between them are real, to the uncompromising positivism that Leonard B. Meyer call "radical empiricism" or "transcendental particularism" in his great, classic work, *Music, the Arts and Ideas*.

These ideas resonant through the American avant-garde film. The doctrine that "That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. . . . Every great man is a unique. The Scipionism of Scipio is precisely that part he could not borrow" is precisely the ground of the individualist element of Stan Brakhage's artistic credo. Brakhage's ideas on art and artmaking have their roots in the conviction that immediate experience is the ground of all truth and all value, and that constructing narrative relations between events depletes the experience of the concrete particular of intensity and, what is perhaps as bad, misrepresents the truth about reality. In this regard, Brakhage's aesthetic theories are consistent with that cluster of belief that Meyer terms "transcendental particularism."

Ideas about American particularism have also had historiographic consequences. Sitney's history of the American avant-garde film reveals its author's Emersonian leanings in its deliberate avoidance of commentary on the European influence on the development of American cinema—commentary that would divert it from its principal subject. Sitney sets out a diachronic morphology of the avant-garde cinema, which charts various attempts to work out the Emersonian problematic of the relationship between consciousness and nature. His is an evolutionary history, and the two forms it presents with greatest enthusiasm are the lyrical and the structural film. He works through a dazzling series of connections, which he presents with considerable virtuosity, to show that the lyrical form transmuted into structural film — to show, more specifically, that the emergence of structural film did not rupture the historical lineage of the American avant-garde film, for it simply used a different set of formal devices to work out the aesthetic problematic that is at the core of the Emersonian tradition. True to the founding ideas of radical empiricism, Sitney's morphology ends up privileging those forms which are conveyed by the ecstasies of those moments when the individual sensation is experienced with such intensity, and so fully, that it absorbs the world.

Histories of the avant-garde cinema commonly divide the field of study into two major phases: the first (European) avant-garde of the twenties, the major figures of which include Viking Eggling, Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Oskar Fischinger, Dimitri Kirsanov, Germaine Dulac, René Clair, Jean Vigo, Man Ray, Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, and Luis Buñuel; and the second (American) avant-garde, which began with Maya Deren, Marie Menken and Williard Maas, flowered with the appearance of the early films of Sidney Peterson, James Broughton, Kenneth Anger, Harry Smith, James and John Whitney, was given fresh life by Stan Brakhage, Ron Rice, Jonas Mekas, Peter Kubelka, Jordan Belson, Robert Nelson, Gunvor

Nelson, George and Mike Kuchar, Ken Jacobs, Larry Jordan, and renewed again by Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, and Hollis Frampton.

This division of the avant-garde into two phases has served polemical purposes. American art has long strived to distinguish itself from European models. However, understanding American vanguardism as a Emersonian practice brings into to question the common belief that, after an exuberant decade of prodigious activity, the first avant-garde cinema—a European practice, associated with European art movements—disappeared and, after almost a decade and a half of quiescence, a new avant-garde film appeared, around the mid-1940s, with a characteristically American form. One of the appeals this historical construction has for cinema historians who want to show that the emergence of the post-World War II avant-garde manifested American particularism is that propounds that the American independent film disappeared in 1930s; and that claim makes plausible the proposition that when the second avant-garde film movement emerged, separated by so many years from the first, it had quite a different character from the film movement of 1920s.

Suppose there were a strong avant-garde cinema in 1920s America, that developed with some measure of independence from the European avant-garde of the twenties (as Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta* [1921] and Ralph Steiner's H_2O [1929] — just to choose two works that are pretty familiar — suggest). Suppose further that an independent cinema with such a character continued through the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s, though, perhaps, it split into two branches, one furthering the radical poetic aspirations of the earlier avant-garde, the other continuing, in the form of the innovative documentary, the indigenous American interest in the thing itself which those two films evince—an interest that, within the American tradition, follows from the stance of "radical empiricism." Then, for example, Marie Menken's *Go! Go! Go!* might be seen to belong to a line that begins with *Manhatta* and continues in the lunch counter sequence of Ralph Steiner and Williard Van Dyke's *The City* (1939)—a film whose Americanness is as marked in Aaron Copeland's poignant score as it is in theme and method—and whose photography, as Scott MacDonald notes, seems "at times reminiscent of *Manhatta*", while *Glimpse of the Garden* could be seen to emerge out of the paradisiacal representation of nature that is such a marked feature of American art and is a dominant of the American independent documentary (and appears as well in *The City*). It then would behoove the historian of the avant-garde cinema to delineate these thematic threads and to analyse the changing modes of their treatment of the concrete existent.

The example illustrates the importance of the more general point that, if an avant-garde cinema with at least some measure of independence from the European avant-garde emerged in America in the twenties, and if it continued through the 1930s and into 1940s, the continuity between the first avant-garde and the second avant garde (customarily said to begin in 1943) would pose an inconvenience to those who espouse the historiographic premise that a new avant-garde, with its own distinctive attributes, emerged virtually *ex nihilo*. It also illustrates that if there were an indigenous American avant-garde film of the 1920s, then the specific features the second avant-garde (and notably its visionary aspiration) that set it apart from the indigenous first avant-garde would have to be accounted for. An historiographic method that rests on the premise that the post-war American avant-garde arose *ex nihilo* would be clearly inadequate. One would, in fact, be justified in assuming, as an initial methodological postulate (to be modified or rejected according to one's empirical findings) that the second avant-garde emerged as the visionary aspirations of the European avant-garde, met with, and transformed the methods, forms and foundational assumptions of the first avant-garde.

A consideration that compels us to examine this possibility is that we now know something of this sort to be the case with the emergence of abstract expressionist painting in New York in the 1940s—we understand that abstract expressionism, once celebrated as the

purest manifestation of a raw American vitality (so celebrated that its exhibition abroad was sponsored by the CIA) emerged out of the School of Paris and extends its formal innovations: we know of the role played by Surrealist ideas about automatist practices in forging the spontaneous, action paintings that we associate with the name Jackson Pollock; and we know the role Hans Hofmann played in transmitting advanced European ideas to his students; and the role that Max Ernst played in disseminating ideas about automatist practices and about the unconscious as "an Other" who is more closely allied with nature than the bourgeois self. We might well ask whether similar influences affected the development of the second American film avant-garde.

On the other hand, suppose that there were an American avant-garde film of the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s, and that this avant-garde, rather than possessing the distinctive attributes of American art, was instead a cinema heavily influenced by the visionary character of Surrealism and German Expressionism (as familiarity with such works as Webber and Watson's *The Fall of the House of Usher,* 1928, and *Lot in Sodom,* 1933, suggests). If these assumptions were true, one would be justified in assuming, as an initial methodological postulate (to be modified or rejected according to one's empirical findings), that the second avant-garde emerged as the visionary character of the first avant-garde—an avant-garde heavily influenced by European artistic ideals—was transformed by the ethos of post-war America.

If the independent cinema emerged in America in the 1920s, and continued through the 1930s and into the 1940s (changing course over those years, as one would expect, but never disappearing), and if that movement formed the basis of the second American avant-garde—then at least one of our hypotheses must be true; and if one of those hypotheses is true, the prevailing history of the New American Cinema is cast into doubt. Either way, it is the history of the avant-garde cinema that describes the emergence of an indigenous, autonomous American avant garde cinema in the later half of the 1940s that this very rich anthology puts at stake. One criterion against which the book should be measured is how effectively it overturns the historiographic assumptions on which the familiar account of the evolution of the avant-garde cinema rests.

There was a remarkable diversity in the American independent film of the 1920s and 1930s—sufficient diversity to form the basis for the subsequent independent cinema. But it does much more. I set out above two assumptions which, if either were true, would bring the prevailing history into doubt: the first, that there was a strong avant-garde cinema in 1920s America, with some measure of independence from the European avant-garde of the twenties, and that this independent cinema continued through the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s; and the second, that there was an American avant-garde film of the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s and that this avant-garde was heavily influenced by the visionary character of Surrealism and German Expressionism. Both propositions are plausible.

Take the career of Paul Strand as exemplary. Strand began his involvement in filmmaking by making, with Charles Sheeler, that classic of the avant-garde, *Manhatta*. The work is extremely American, and indeed Sheeler was associated, through his involvement with Walter Arensberg, with William Carlos Williams, that great prophet of radical empiricism and celebrator of direct perception. Strand and Sheeler's inclusion of quotations from Walt Whitman reflects an enthusiasm for the poet that Sheeler and Strand shared with many of those who championed beliefs about American particularism. What is more important, Horak acutely observes that Strand and Sheeler treat the built forms of Manhattan essentially as natural formations, as mountains or canyons, and so shows that this work resolves the dialectic between civilization by according priority to nature, as is consistent with the tradition.

The film is composed of series of images in which hard, and static, geometric forms, which abut one another like the facets in Analytic Cubist painting, and articulate a shallow space which recedes only slightly from the picture-plane (including several that, as examples of

“photographic cubism,” are at least the equal of Stieglitz’ *Steerage*), and mixed with them, images in which hard, and static, geometric forms are combined with softer forms (of steam, and water, and even humans). In combining hard geometric form with softer and more fluid forms, the images in *Manhatta* attempt to fuse Cubism and Impressionism (an effort the choice of object matter testifies to, for it includes some of the favorites of the Cubists and some of the favorites of the Impressionists). Of course, the film displays important similarities to Strand’s great photograph *Wall Street* (1913).

These soft, billowing forms are a important key to the filmmaker’s ambitions, for they have a significance that derives from the historical backdrop against which the film was made. The use of Impressionist-inspired forms had been the stock-in-trade of photographers who had begun working in the later years of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century (photographers such as Peter Henry Emerson, Edward Steichen, Gertrude Käsebier, and generally the photographers who went under the name of the Photo-Secession). The f-64 school (under whose influence Strand had developed his views about the photograph) and the “Pure Photography” of Frederick H. Evans—even, implicitly, the approach exemplified in the extraordinary work of Oscar G. Rejlander (whose *The Two Ways of Life* of 1857 is one of photo-history’s paradigmatic moments)—reacted against the use of what they saw as anti-photographic forms. The f-64 school and Evan’s “Pure Photography” repudiated all painterly influences, especially that of Impressionist painting.

At first, the reaction against photography’s submission to principles derived from other media took the form of affirming photography’s affinity with Cubist forms. The effort to convert the deep space that the photographic illusion generally presents into the faceted, shallow space of Cubism was at one time Strand’s principal mission. Strand hoped to reformulate the space of photographic illusion, converting it into the shallow, faceted space of Cubist practice, without minimizing the photograph’s affinity for total objectivity, its tendency towards factual reportage and its proclivity for rendering the thing itself (attributes of the photography which the f-64 school so valorized), and indeed without resorting to any of the painterly devices of the Pictorialist photographers.

The signal recognition the motivated *Manhatta*, I believe, was that photography was allied with Impressionist art as well, as so photographs could adopt some features of Impressionist art without dissembling. The Impressionist painter was among the first artists to accord transitory phenomena a legitimate place in a work of art; and an affinity for the fleeting and the transitory, as Siegfied Kracauer pointed out, is an essential characteristic of the photographic image. This established the basis for reconciling Impressionist and Cubist features to cinema. *Manhatta* is an effort to create a work which has at least some of the defining attributes of both Impressionist and Cubist art, but which does not contravene the inherent characteristics of the photography.

Neither Sheeler nor Strand showed any particular enthusiasm for the urban world. Stand’s interest was, by and large, rural America, and village life in France and in Italy. And Sheeler, in the late teens and early twenties, just before making *Manhatta*, produced such works as *Bucks County Barn* (1918 version), and *Barn Abstraction* (1918), works which revel in the austerity of popular architecture, and shortly after making the film, began creating paintings representing domestic objects of Shaker provenance. Their untypical excusion in *Manhatta* into using urban object matter can only be explained by the fact that Cubism was also an urban phenomenon

The desire to reconcile photography’s mission of fixing perception with its affinity for fleeting, transitory phenomena—for phenomena having to do with light, smoke and steam (so evident in *Manhatta*, too)—and more generally, for reconciling the hard geometric shapes of Cubism with the softer, wispier phenomena of Impressionist painting, are the real inspiration of *Manhatta*. The Analytical Cubist method eventuated in the despairing conclusion that flux defies

having an objective shape imposed on it, and so nothing stable, nothing certain, nothing objective is to be found in the riot of successive aspects—that they constitute nothing more than a phantasmagoria. “Photographic Cubism,” however, was something different: the photographer’s fragmentation of reality has the purpose of disclosing the object, to put an end to the precession of the aspectual by providing us with a machine representation of the thing itself. *Manhatta* thus reflects the role of the city in creating a crisis of perception (apparent in Cubist art) and the role of photography in alleviating this crises. It is in this context that we can understand Strand’s most peculiar piece of writing, “Photography and the New God,” as a truly visionary piece of writing.

A painting Sheeler created, likely, shortly after he and Paul Strand finished *Manhatta* reveals a similar purpose; based on a still from *Manhatta*, it also exploits the spatial qualities of Cubism. Entitled *Church Street El* (1921), the painting, which depicts buildings with tops truncated, exhibits the characteristic framing of a photograph (in which the frame acts only as a provisional division that tentatively distinguishes between the space inside and outside the frame). Further, in photography, vantage-point and framing are joined as one fused feature, and so it is with this painting; its high-angle vantage-point results in the buildings tipping back from the center into a slightly recessive space, and so endows the painting with the shallow space characteristic of Cubism (much as high-angle views in the film do).

A more significant example, perhaps, is a painting Sheeler made in 1931. *View from New York* combines hard and soft forms in a manner similar to that of *Manhatta*, using a hard-edged geometric structure to contain soft, billowy forms. The painting depicts, using almost no modeling and in a very flat light, the interior of the artist’s studio, showing parts of a chair, a lamp hanging from a sky-hook, a film editing bench, a window with a grid of glass-panes and, outside of the window, fleecy clouds. And, as in *Manhatta*, the image space is compressed, in this case by eliminating the walls, the floor and the ceiling (that is, by framing the image in a fashion similar to that which he and Strand did in framing the images in their film).

The interplay, evident in *View from New York* and *Manhatta*, between softer, biomorphic elements and hard-edged, “modern” elements appears in another of Sheeler’s paintings closer in time to *Manhatta*, viz., the brilliantly conceived and entitled *Self-Portrait* of 1923, which depicts a shadow of a man’s upper torso, cut off at the top at the middle of the face, falling over dark window, whose frame is presented in the most austere fashion, in front of which there is table with a telephone on it, both of which are also severely presented.

Strand’s filmmaking enterprises seem to constitute a curious list, for after making *Manhatta*, he went on, in the late 1930s and 1940s, to work in radical social documentaries and fictions, eg *The Wave* (1936), *Heart of Spain* (1937) and *Native Land* (1942). The purely social account of that is usually given of the seeming transformation of the formal experimentalist into a political issues filmmaker: the booming markets of the 1920s gave way to bust of 1929 that left a decade of economic havoc in its wake. The flush economy of 1920s provided individuals with the resources to make work that served any particular programme — enough capital was “left over” to afford artists the “luxury” of exploring purely formal issues. The social urgencies of the 1930s made such explorations seem something of indulgence — and one that the economy could no longer afford. Artists began to consider their social responsibilities.

Set aside the problem that result from these claims’ being based on dubious aesthetic propositions; there are many other problems with the claim. Primary among them is that the claims rest on the view that the formal experimental work of the 1920s and the political issues film of the 1930s have no common ground. But they do in fact share important features, and paramount among them is that both the formal film and the political issues film share an interest in the careful observation of local, American reality. In this sense, the so-called “formal” film is not exclusive formal, for the relation between the work and world is a matter of no little concern while the “political issues” film is not concerned exclusively with the political issues, but formal

investigation, along with the close observation of local reality remain key concerns — just consider, as an illustrative comparison the “American scene” photographs of Walker Evans (whose work, significantly, provided the key model for the most successful of the Beat/Ab. Ex. photographers, Robert Frank).

There is another way to consider the American interest in the direct perception and the interest in the everyday, the local, the “low,” and that is to contrast the early films of Ralph Steiner with similar European films—to contrast, as examples, Ralph Steiner’s *$H_2 0$* (1929) and the famous cream separator sequence in Sergej Ezjenstejn’s *The General Line*. Or Steiner’s less frequently viewed (but equally interesting) *Mechanical Principles* (1931) with Fernand Léger’s *Le ballet mécanique*. The contrast between the two pairs of films is similar, and the similarity tells a great deal about what distinguishes the norms of American from the norms of European art. The predominant visual characteristics of both the sequence from *The General Line* (like the film as whole) and *Le ballet mécanique* derive from their maker’s acceptance of principle of radical transformation that was so important to Cubist art, according to which artworks succeed by reconfiguring everyday objects, to produce an object which, by virtue of its formal intricacy, transcends the realm to which everyday objects belong. *$H_2 0$* and *Mechanical Principles* are utterly different in this regard: neither film evinces any desire to elevate the forms they exfoliate above the quotidian; rather, they attempt to reveal the intricacy of the forms that structure everyday objects. We shall see that the difference in beliefs about the status of form that underlies the contrast between *$H_2 0$* and *The General Line*, and that between *Mechanical Principles* and *Le ballet mécanique*; we shall also see that rejection of beliefs concerning the transcendentality of form has been commonplace in American art, and characterizes the difference between the poetic of ideas of William Carlos Williams from those of Ezra Pound, and that the conviction that status of artworks is “equal” to the real itself is one advocated by Charles Olson, an important influence on Stan Brakhage’s filmmaking, as well as that by Stan Brakhage.

Scott MacDonald has published an insightful commentary on Steiner’s filmmaking career that astutely rejects the common analysis of *$H_2 0$*, according to which the film progresses from representational to abstract. MacDonald remarks on the film’s ending (supposedly its most abstract section)

> And yet these images are never abstract in the conventional meaning of the term, since one of the layers of imagery we are *always* aware of is the literal surface of the water the reflections are occurring in/on. As a result we are always aware that the phantasmagoria of “abstract” shapes, designs, and textures is a literal, everyday, observable reality, that the miraculous visuals Steiner presents are the result of careful observation and thoughtful composition *and nothing more*.

These remarks contain considerable truth; however the remarks also overstate that truth. For in fact, Steiner’s *$H_2 0$*, like *Mechanical Principles*, does press towards abstraction; however, its abstraction arises out of its concentration on the immediate and the “low,” and it always respects the character of the immediate and the “low.” This, indeed is one of features that distinguishes *Mechanical Principles* from *Le ballet mécanique*: Léger (his protestations that he was developing a new form of realism notwithstanding) strived to transform the objects that we encounter in everyday life into pure forms; that aspiration is what allowed Léger to mix close-ups of machine parts with pure graphic forms derived from typography. Steiner, on the other hand, attempted to discover the abstract principles that gave structure to the everyday world.

This cavil notwithstanding, MacDonald’s commentary has much to recommend it. Not

the least of values is that his emphasis on the realist impulse in Steiner's work helps explain a key feature of Steiner's career, and that is why Steiner, like Strand, went on to make radical, independent documentaries in the 1930s with such works as *Pie in the Sky* (1935) and *The City* (1939) and why, in the 1960s and 1970s he returned to making films that, like *H_20* and *Mechanical Principles*, that exfoliated the formal possibilities that arise through close observation of the everday objects of one's immediate environment. His case study of Steiner's filmmaking, then, provides a fine example of the interplay of the documentary and formal impulses in the aspiration to capture direct perception—which example is repeated over and over in the history of the American independent cinema.

Stanley Cavell's brilliant exposition of the parallels between the philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ludwig Wittgenstein brings the Emersonianism of the American film avant-garde comes more clearly into focus and sharpens our understanding of its profound significance. It is generally well known that Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* arises out of Wittgenstein deep feelings that the "deep disquietudes" reflected in philosophical thinking are the consequence of the attempt to extend ordinary language beyond its proper province. Cavell rephrases this, to emphasis that this disquietude is the result of violence done to the ordinary by refusing or forcing its everyday order.

Cavell's analysis of the parallels between Emerson's philosophy and that of Ludwig Wittgenstein even illuminates the core idea between American artist's refuse to accord artistic form the status of a transcendent. For Emerson and Wittgenstein depict the move away from the ordinary no as ascent towards the heavens, but rather as all in violence. They view the impulse to refuse the ordinary as a form of violence towards the everyday. Emerson, especially, believed that the bond that ties humans to their immediate circumstance is organic — indeed one of the virtues of Cavell's commentary is that it highlights Emerson's uses of terms such as "blood," "organic," "natural," and "biological" to speak of what we defy when we attempt to escape into denatured abstractions. The view has profound implications, which Emerson expounded in "Worship"

> And so I think that the last lesson of life, the choral song which rises from all elements and all angels, is, a voluntary obedience, a necessitated freedom. Man is made of the same atoms as the world is, he shares the same impressions, predispositions, and destiny. When his mind is illuminated, when his heart is kind, he throws himself joyfully into the sublime order, and does, with knowledge, what the stones do by structure.

What motivates the propositions this passage offers is neutral monist conception of reality on which everything, from stones to ideas and impressions, is composed of the same "stuff." The usual reason for adopting the position of neutral monism is that does away with the problem of dualism, which sees human consciousness as isolated from nature. Neutral monism, because it maintains that consciousness and matter are composed of the same "stuff" offers a way of understanding how matter affects the mind and mind affects matter. The conceptual route from a belief in theory which explains the mutual interaction of mind and mind to ideas that underlie "field composition" is a short one; for Duncan and Olson, that path was mapped by Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysics.

What is important for our purposes is to recognize how such a field conception founds a conception of artistic form which does not accord artistic form the status of a transcendental. 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": we have

already noted this assertation, “the choral song which rises from all elements and all angels, is, a voluntary obedience. . . . When [a person’s mind] is illuminated, when his heart is kind, he throws himself joyfully into the sublime order, and does, with knowledge, what the stones do by structure.” The action painter opens herself to field of circumambient influences, and their actions impinge on her, impelling her to act in her turn—to perform a particular gesture, and the gesture leaves a trace, in the paint stroked or dripped or poured on the canvas. The form in the paint manifests the actions of the painter, and the actions of the painter manifest the influences on the field on the painter. At no point does this circuit of exchanges of energy break with the world of matter/consciousness, to attain the status of a transcendental. A work of art imitates nature in the manner of its operation (as John Cage, following D.T. Suzuki used to say), so its form never rises above nature. If we understand abstract expressionism in this way, the distance that separates Paterson Ewen’s “natural phenomena paintings” from the practices of the abstract expressionists is not so great as it might initially seem; and Max Ernst’s Surrealist landscapes seem at home among the works of this strain of American realism.

The non-transcendental conception of form constitutes the basis for the alliance between avant-garde work of vanguard persuasion and documentary work. 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 thorough-going documental commitment to careful observation of everyday reality. Even the most marked division in his work, that between the photographed and the painted films, is sublated by the unifying power of this principle of concern with immediate experience, for as Emerson sometimes does, Brakhage takes the activity of the mind to be what is closest to hand, and conducts a quasi-documental exploration of this immediate reality. That this profoundly subjective reality (at once both the most personal and yet universal reality, as Emerson realized) is staunchly independent of the prevailing norms of conventionalized perception (as Emerson also realized) means that the documents that Brakhage produces, driven by this aspiration have a highly individual character; yet this the formal innovations he develops have a documental end.

Along with Gertrude Stein, a major influence on this aspect of Brakhage’s work, was the poet and poetic theorist, Charles Olson, himself a learned student of the New England Transcendentalists (and especially, of Herman Melville’s writing). Writing about the work of Robert Creeley, Olson proposes two possibilities for narration, and they have very much to do with the supposed dichotomy between the documentary and experimental wings of the independent film movement.

> I take it there is huge gain to square away at narrative now, not as fiction by as RE-ENACTMENT. Taking it this way I see two possibilities:
> (1) what I call DOCUMENT simply to emphasize that the events alone do the work, that the narrator stays OUT, functions as pressure not as interpreting person, illuminates not by argument or “creativity” but by master of force (as space is shaper, confining maintaining inside tensions of objects), the art, to make his meanings clear by how he juxtaposes, correlates, and causes to interact whatever events and persons he chooses to set in motion. In other words his ego or person is NOT of the story whatsoever. He is, if he makes it, light from outside, the thing itself [that idea again!] doing the casting of what shadows;
> (2) the exact opposite, the NARRATOR IN, the total IN to the above total OUT, total speculation as against the half management, half interpretation, the narrator taking on himself the job of making clear by way of his own person that life is preoccupation with itself, taking up the push of his own single intelligence to

> make it, to be — by his conjectures — so powerful inside the story that he makes the story swing on him, his eye the eye of nature INSIDE (as is the same eye, outside) a light-maker.

Olson's remarks on narration have relevance to Brakhage's wok; the major question that arises concerning this relevance is whether Brakhage's means of narration is with "narrator out" or "narrator out." I believe that the weight of the evidence (especially in his radical reformation of the space of the image, to suggest that the images belong to consciousness operating in an intense mode) comes down in favour of consider that employs the later method. But reread the two descriptions, and one realizes that question is peculiarly undecidable; and that undecidability has much to do with the fact that Brakhage's work does not systematically distinguish the objective and the subjective realms. Both what we ordinarily consider the objective realm and what we ordinarily consider the subjective realm are proper subjects for carefully scrutiny, of the sort that issues in document; the observation makes us aware of the appositeness of Gerald O'Grady's characterization of Brakhage's films as "document of consciousness." If we consider the cardinal lesson of Surrealism, that presentation of the consciousness operating in its more extreme modes constitutes a disruptive, call it avant-garde practice, then we can see how permeable is the division between the documentary and the avant-garde film.

I pointed out above that Emerson's metaphysics is of a monistic bend. The belief that all reality, mental and physical alike, are constituted by energy exchanges amongst the basic "particles" (cf. Emerson's "atoms") of reality also founds the belief that the world is constituted not of stable, enduring objects, but of events. The most profound expositor of a metaphysics that views reality as made up of events is Alfred North Whitehead, but the view can be found in Emerson's writing.

> There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees. Our globe seen by God is a transparent law, not a mass of facts. The law dissolves the fact and holds it fluid. Our culture is the predominance of an idea which draws after it this train of cities and institutions. Let us rise into another idea; they will disappear. The Greek sculpture is all melted away, as if it had been statues of ice; here and there a solitary figure or fragment remaining, as we see flecks and scraps of snow left in cold dells and mountain clefts in June and July. For the genius that created it creates now somewhat else. The Greek letters last a little longer, but are already passing under the same sentence and tumbling into the inevitable pit which the creation of new thought opens for all that is old. The new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet; the new races fed out of the decomposition of the foregoing. New arts destroy the old. See the investment of capital in aqueducts, made useless by hydraulics; fortifications, by gun-powder; roads and canals, by railways; sails, by steam; steam by electricity.

The reality of this process metaphysic provides Emerson with yet another justification for advocating close attention to the immediate particular, for in 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 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 such a metaphysic, Emerson deduces a phenomenology of startling appositeness to the poetics of abstract expression, with its emphasis on immediate experience, lived wholly in the vital, pulsing, present (and so to the films of Stan Brakhage):

> . . . 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 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." Accordingly, artworks must come into being through a similarly saltatory and impulsive manner.

Emerson's interest in spontaneity, and his believe that human creativity (and artmaking) imitates nature in the manner of its operation led Emerson to propose the importance of chance, a notion which artists could not embrace until 1940s (largely through the influence of that other prophet of immediate experience, John Cage), when the greater acceptance of the idea that the form of work of art does not have a the status of a transcendental, had paved the way for it:

> The ancients, struck with this irreducibleness of the elements of human life to calculation, exalted Chance into a divinity; but that is to stay too long at the spark, which glitters truly at one point, but the universe is warm with the latency of the same fire.

Emerson developed this idea along lines that abstract expressionists (including Stan Brakhage) would also have found familiar:

> . . . All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having. I would gladly be moral and keep due metes and bounds, which I dearly love, and allow the most to the will of man; but I have set my heart on honesty in this chapter, and I can see nothing at last, in success or failure, than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal.

Emerson recognized that one of the most radical implications of his phenomenology of

time consciousness. If in certain experiences, our attention is consolidated in a single moment, and if in these times retention and expectation play no role whatsoever, then each moment is experiences as isolated, and time itself as discontinuous. Emerson accepted this phenomenological description of intense modes of consciousness. Here is how he describes how fascinating ideas grip us:

> . . . When I converse with a profound mind, or if at any time being alone I have good thoughts, I do not at once arrive at satisfactions, as when, being thirsty, I drink water; or go to the fire, being cold; no! but I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose, as if the clouds that covered it parted at intervals and showed the approaching traveller the inland mountains, with the tranquil eternal meadows spread at their base, whereon flocks graze and shepherds pipe and dance. But every insight from this realm of thought is felt as initial, and promises a sequel. I do not make it; I arrive there, and behold what was there already. I make! O no! I clap my hands in infantine joy and amazement before the first opening to me of this august magnificence, old with the love and homage of innumerable ages, young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert. And what a future it opens! I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West.

The idea that ideas, and the forms of artworks, are discovered rather than invented by the thinker/artist, that thinking is ecstatic (in the sense that carries one outside oneself) are ideas that the abstract expressionists, and Stan Brakhage, have announced.

But that is not the most radical *implicatum* of this passage. For Emerson describes the feeling that “every though is initial, and promises a sequel.” The phrase is oxymoronic, at least if “promise” be taken literally”: each moment cannot literally commit to a have sequel if each represents a new begining. Temporal events cannot be, at once, discontinuous and continuous (in the sense that one lead to another to which it loans its character). Of course, oxymoron can be interesting literary device, insofar disrupts conventional thinking; but I don’t think that Emerson really intended that we take the oxymoron as representing a deep truth about the irrational nature of temporal succession. It is more likely that he meant us to construe the passage as intending the feeling that each moment seems so replete as to be pregnant with the future; but that no successor emerges from out of the womb the present; rather, the next moment erupts as though *ex nihilo*, as though by autogenesis, and lacking any forebears. It emerges the next in “a series of surprises.”

Emerson applied this idea to the self as well. Yet another virtue of Cavell’s commentaries on Emerson is that he points out that radical implications of Emerson’s idea of the self — that the self is discontinuous. 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 (as Cavell points out) 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. For Emerson, it is very much with self as it is with world:

> This appearances indicate the fact that 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.

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, or that have through following the conflicts and variations within a skein of paint in a Pollock canvas. Brakhage, of course, claims to have developed such views by reading the writings of Gertrude Stein, and no doubt he reporting his own apprenticeship accurately. Nonetheless, we can discern the roots of Stein practices in Emerson.