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From Painting into Cinema: A Study of Jack Chambers' Circle

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> The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something.... To see clearly is poetry, philosophy and religion all in one.
>
> John Ruskin

When Jack Chambers began working in film in 1966, he had already established a solid reputation as a painter. Over the next few years this reputation continued to grow; indeed, Chambers can be said to have acquired a measure of popular fame. This fame rests largely on a series of canvasses completed between 1968 and 1971. These paintings seem to have been admired for their objective description of everyday reality.

Curiously, the films Chambers made during these same years are hardly known. They are rarely shown and even less frequently written about. This saddens me, not only because I believe they are fine works but also because I see the films as an integral part of Chambers' *oeuvre* — as are his writings, which are just as infrequently mentioned. It should be interesting to art historians to ask why an artist with Chambers' perceptions and ideals embarked on projects in filmmaking. In the process of formulating an answer to this question, some insights into Chambers' work, both in painting and in film, should emerge.

It is my conviction that Chambers' art and thought are Romantic in character. His preoccupations, far from being centred on objective description, are really idealist in nature. It was these interests that led him to the cinema, a medium which enabled him to further his exploration of perception.

* * *

Traversing the range of artwork concerned with important epistemological questions, there are two basic and, in large measure, conflicting strains. The first is concerned with affirming the status of the artwork as object and with understanding the perceptual effects of the real material from which a work is made, rather than with those effects which derive from its illusory subject matter.

The development of this sort of practice was predicated on a particular understanding of the nature of the aesthetic response. It was alleged that for a person's response to be genuinely "aesthetic" it must be characterized by "distance"; that is, it must involve a setting aside of everyday concerns and a focusing of attention exclusively on the formal construction of the artwork.[1] Such a view leads logically to the attempt to eliminate "subject matter" or "content" from a work on the understanding that a preoccupation with such content tends to cause what was commonly called "underdistancing." Underdistancing was viewed as problematic because it interfered with that disinterested contemplation through which a work's formal properties were apprehended and its aesthetic value experienced.

Behind this view lay a critique of the role of illusion in traditional representational art. The illusionistic features of a work of art, it was argued, served only the artist's attempt to provide a convincing impression of reality. Oversimplifying matters enormously, one could state that the craftsmanly concern with the convincingness of the illusion was predicated on the belief that the greater the degree of likeness between "image" and "model," the finer the work. But this view led to odd consequences. For if the degree of likeness between image and model determined the value of a work of art, then that art would be finest which overcame all distinctions between the image and the object of which it was an image. It could almost be said, in the traditional view, that the work of art aspired to become that which it represented. That, however, would suggest that the work itself was ontologically deficient and that the degree of reality it possessed (its "reality value") was somewhat less than the "reality value" of that which it represented.

The formalists maintained that a work of art's strength lay in the fact that it was not simply another object in the world but was a very special sort of object, inasmuch as it possessed a particu-

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larly interesting visual structure. This visual structure need not have any relation to other objects in the world, but was important in its own right. In other words, the formalists proposed that representation take a secondary place to visual structure as the focus of attention.

This precipitated a major change in the making of art. The essential source of effect in illusionistic art was its subject matter; the work's formal construction — so it was believed — served only to enhance those effects which arose from the work's content. The formalists found this view unacceptable since, they argued, effects arising from subject matter made psychical "distancing" difficult. In order to obviate this difficulty, strategies were developed to eschew representation in favour of stressing the work's material construction. These strategies included the elimination of illusionistic construction, or of reference to any space or time other than that in which the work is actually seen or heard, and the inclusion of those marks of the sort that tend to arise accidentally when materials of some medium are subjected to the physical processes involved in creating a work.

The history of this sort of artistic practice has been characterized by rapid changes in styles. Subtending the many styles generated in the few decades of this endeavour there has been a rigorously reductionist logic of development; all the major breakthroughs in the practice have involved the discovery and repudiation of yet another expressionistic, illusionistic, or accidental feature of an artwork. The object of this development can be understood as the attempt to formulate an ever more precise definition of an artwork.[2] It was inevitable, therefore, that it should lead to the production, familiar from minimalist art, structural cinema, "task-based" dance, and the music of gradual change, of monomorphic structures.

In opposition to this line of analysis, there has emerged another body of work which explores epistemological questions. Animated by spiritual considerations, this work represents an extension into the present of the idealist concerns of our religious past, and particularly of one of the most tenacious styles originating in that past, namely expressionism.

While this work is firmly committed to speculative, metaphysical inquiry, it is also informed by an epistemological conviction concerning the nature of vision and imagination. According to this conviction, vision is not the result of a simple process by which the perceptual organs passively respond to the influence of particular objects in the environment; vision, or better, the Visionary Experience, is understood as a complex and mysterious process whereby the mind transcends the realm of observed particulars and holds them in apprehended unity.

Many works of art within this tradition have had the nature of this Visionary Experience as their primary subject of concern.[3] The ways of embodying this concern have been varied: some artists have attempted to develop complex, polymorphic forms which directly represent the diversified characteristics of the experience; others have attempted to use simple structure to offer a model, or analogue, of the essential structures of that experience.

For almost two decades, the experimental cinema was sustained by such idealist aspirations. Beginning with Maya Deren and continuing in an unbroken line through the work of Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Ed Emshwiller and Bruce Baillie, visionary filmmakers were consistently at the forefront of the art of cinema and were responsible for formulating a new language of cinema. In the more recent past, however, a significant change occurred. With the emergence, around 1967, of Sharits, Landow, Gehr, Jacobs, Frampton and (with some qualifications[4]) Snow as the major filmmakers of our time, the simple and reductive forms have virtually displaced the polymorphic forms of the visionary cinema as the dominant mode of experimental film practice.

It was at precisely the same time when this displacement was occurring that the painter, Jack Chambers, began to make films. His first completed film, *Mosaic*, was released in 1967, though he had worked on it for nearly two years. That an artist of such obviously metaphysical inclination should have turned to the cinema at this moment to express his beliefs is of interest to me, and I should like to reflect on the manner in

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which he reconciled his own concerns with the formal explorations which dominated the experimental cinema of the time. But before proceeding we must consider his earlier work in other media since it indicates something of Chambers' views on the photographic image, temporality, and light, the very elements from which he was to forge his cinema.

For some time prior to making his first films,[5] Chambers had been making paintings, the essential concerns of which were the ongoing rhythms of life and death. In these works he used imagery derived from photographs, most often from snapshots of family and friends. Sometimes the figures in the paintings appear in the same environment (cemeteries, fields or gardens) in which they appeared in the photographs, but as often, they are excised from the landscape in which they originally appeared and placed in a new space — for example, *Olga at the South Pole* (1963), *Olga Near Arva* (1963), *Olga Along the Thames* (1963), *All Things Fall* (1963). Usually the works involve a contrast between the tonal range of the subject and that of the background (which in these paintings sometimes approached monochromaticity) and depict the subject in a self-contained posture. The effect of these devices was to create a sense of discontinuity between figure and ground which seems to isolate the subject.

Typically, the colours in these works are pale-toned, to the point of having an almost bleached appearance. While they have a rather dense painterly texture, they are also suffused with an intense and barely contained light which seems to struggle outward. The effect of this manner of handling light is to evoke the sense of something otherworldly.

The manner in which Chambers utilized discontinuities in these works forcefully foreshadows his later move to film. In certain works of this period, discontinuities in the spatial field suggest discrete moments of time.[6] In *Olga and Mary Visiting* (1964-65), for example, Olga's hand is held as though she is sipping coffee. Her coffee cup, however, is not held in her hand, but is above her and to her right, in the position it might have occupied before she sat down, or might occupy after she stands up. Through the use of constructions like this, a painting became a record of several distinct movements, rather than, as is usually the case, of the single instant.

Thus from the earliest of his work that bears this distinctive stamp,[7] Chambers evinced an interest in forms which synthesized discrete moments and discrete impressions. The frequency with which such devices recur in his works insists upon their importance. Their significance for Chambers can best be understood by considering their relation to his theories on the way a perception is constructed. In an interview with Chambers, Ross Woodman asked, "What were you after in isolating or particularizing certain parts of the anatomy; the hand holding the teacup, a face of someone smiling, etc.?" Chambers responded:

> A painting gets put together just like an experience — in particles. *Mary and Olga Visiting* isn't a description of a visual moment; it's the accumulation of experienced interiors brought into focus.[8]

This idea of experience as synthetic, as incorporating a multiplicity of sensory inputs, is further developed in another statement Chambers made in the same interview. Responding to Woodman's question, "Do you consider yourself a realistic painter?" he replied:

> Yes, but I don't paint an exclusively visual reality. The visual is only one aspect of an experience. Each sensory organ records reality in its own way: a smell, a sound, temperature, texture, a landscape can reawaken their own image of an experience. The visual is enriched through association.[9]

Implicit in this statement is the view that perception is more than the registering upon consciousness of "a state of affairs" which existed at a single moment and which is accessible to any of the senses independently of the others. The idea that perception is a synthetic process, integrating impressions of "states of affairs" existing at different moments, and given by a number of senses,[10] is, of course, one of the benchmarks of Romantic thought; one thinks readily of Wordsworth's lines about "those passages of life that give/Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how/ the mind is lord and master — Outward sense the obedient

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servant of her will."[11]

If the works of this period seem, in their concern with temporality and with their analogues of "montage-construction," to be strongly affected by certain formal characteristics of the cinema, they also evince a growing appreciation of the characteristics of photographic vision. Typically in these works, the deep space of traditional painting is flattened by the removal of an environment for the figures or by the fragmentation of a unified, continuous, deep space. The single surface of the painting is broken into a number of self-contained, though related, images. The result of this flattening of the space is that the objects appear to be spread out equidistantly, much as they appear in the camera's, but not the eye's, field of view. Furthermore, in these works, Chambers eschews the use of variations in colour to create form-in-depth. In fact, colour variations are restricted to a very limited range; as a result, tone becomes a property of the surface of the work much as it is in the photographic image. Some of Chambers' work of this period (e.g. *Daffs*, 1964-65) even resemble a photographic negative or bas-relief;[12] the colour is handled in such a way that forms appear to be modulated by light, and painted forms are sometimes visible from one angle though not from another. At this time, too, Chambers began to experiment with structuring form out of a constellation of points rather than by using outline. Consequently, the particular character of these pieces bears a strong affinity to the grainy texture of photographic enlargements.

Many of these paintings consist of a number of objects or people — sometimes (as in the case of *Daffs*) portions of objects (a doorknob, part of a table top, a section of a door and window) — against a monochrome background. Chambers used this monochrome surface in a highly original way. Such a device had become, since the time of Matisse, something of a commonplace, for it tended, in conformity with the modernist ideal, to flatten the pictorial surface. But Chambers' use of the monochrome surface served altogether different ends. The portions of objects depicted in such works as *Daffs* represent remembered details; the monochrome background represents the vaguely recollected background against which the details are remembered, the unspecific "field" — to use the phenomenological term — of the experience. But even this aspect of the paintings hints at something more. While the field of an experience is present in the experience, what it contains is undisclosed to that experience. Its contents, therefore, have an almost paradoxical quality; while they are immanent in experience, they also transcend the grasp of experience. An image "field" of an experience is, accordingly, a good image, for the mysterious is something which enters our experience yet, in doing so, does not reveal its nature in its entirety.

One last characteristic of the paintings of this period demands comment. Chambers' work relies heavily on the depiction of familiar persons, objects and environments. In part, this is to evoke the sense of "periphery" of personalized objects with which he surrounds himself and onto which he can project his own experiences. But there is more to their use than simply that; familiar objects are objects which tend to elicit personal associations. Their images seem almost to be internalized; indeed, images of these "others" constitute one's experience. Thus, in Chambers' work, these images suggest the dissolution of the limited self and the discovery of that grander self that encompasses the Other. Further still, the use of light, colour and discontinuity which we have just described, and particularly the chilling "frozen moment" quality of the postures of his figures (which is so extreme that stasis sometimes appears almost a foreboding presence), tends to idealize the subject matter of these works. In this way, Chambers suggests that the experience of even the most common places and familiar persons can be invaded by the sense of the mysterious or the marvellous.[13] Indeed, a fundamental characteristic in much of Chambers' work is the tension between the terrifying quality of death and the peaceful quality discovered in those personalized objects with which one surrounds oneself, between the sense of the fragility of the self and the extraordinary strength of the point at which the internal and the external worlds meet to form a unity.

A series of canvasses completed between 1966 and 1967, known as the silver canvasses, are marked by an intensified concern with light. In

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this series, the reduction of the form-creating function of colour, and the correlative enhancement of the formative functions of light, are carried to their extreme. Working with large-figure compositions, Chambers painted these canvasses in close tones of silver. Metallic aluminum paint is employed to give the surfaces of the paintings a highly reflective quality. The pieces are, quite literally, compositions of light; they find their very being in light. The reflected light creates forms that appear to protrude from the surface rather than recede from it, as is typical in painting. Conflicting with these plastic effects are the effects of monochromicity of the surface. The elimination of the subtle gradations of tone and colour which painters use to model forms, along with the strongly reflective properties of the surface, act to flatten the image. Thus, the silver paintings produce, simultaneously, an impression of extreme flatness and of startling depth.

In addition, these works indicate Chambers' continuing interest in the photograph and in the perceptual discoveries afforded by it. The positive modelling, rather than the negative modelling characteristic of the traditional paintings, itself resembles a feature prevalent in most photographic images. The absence of detail, and the rendering of large surfaces of the paintings in undifferentiated tones, further affirms this resemblance to photographs, particularly photographs which are incorrectly exposed (and so are rather light or dark overall) and which lack detail and differentiation in their highlight or shadow areas.

These works indicate a substantial shift in Chambers' attitude towards the subjects of his paintings. The subjects of the earlier works (1963-66), based as they were on snapshots of family, friends and relatives, were drawn from the artist's personal life. In looking at them, one senses Chambers' strong rapport with his subjects. The silver paintings, on the other hand, are characterized by a strong sense of detachment. In fact, they could fairly be described as analytical works. For his concern in this period is no longer with incarnating the feeling of his intuitive participation with the figures of his life, but rather with examining the act of perception itself, with studying the *method* by which objects and figures are known. He is no longer content with celebrating the fact of intimate knowledge; rather he wants to explore, to *know* intimate knowledge.[14]

Despite these evidently analytic concerns, these paintings do possess some idealizing features. Because the image in the paintings is reflected, its forms and tones depend upon the viewer's vantage point. Moving about these paintings, one notices that the image apparently changes from negative to positive and back again. Admittedly, this serves to integrate the space and time of viewing into the structure of the work itself. But it does something else as well; it literally transforms the work into a construction of light. The interest, both in light and in the way what is perceived depends upon the perceiver, can fairly be characterized as idealist.

The silver paintings also elicit a different form of temporal experience than does a traditional representational work. One's response to such a painting can be said to involve contradictory temporal aspects. On the one hand, it involves sensing, intensely, the real time in which the work is viewed; on the other, it involves identification with the illusory "historical" time which the representation seemed to embody. Since this latter time was bound up with the content of the work rather than with its form (i.e. with its representational rather than its presentational aspects), modernist artists developed a series of strategies which operated to eliminate all reference to it from the work, and to emphasize the real time of the experience. In the work of the previous period (1963-66), Chambers had, by presenting a series of discrete temporal incidents on a single canvas, disassembled the unified historical time of illusionistic painting, replacing it with an idealized temporality. Still, one can say that the temporal experience involves conflicting aspects, for it encompasses all the moments of time in which the various events depicted took place, as well as the time in which the experience of the work itself actually takes place. The silver canvasses elicit a much purer form of temporal experience. For when looking at these works, one is so acutely aware of the way in which one's movements around the canvas affect the object viewed that the experience of the actual time in which the piece is viewed tends to overwhelm any thought of any

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other time.

In the silver paintings, the time and space in which the work is viewed become part of what is experienced, part of the work's structure. Chambers himself is aware of this phenomenon:

> As you move, the positive forms become negative and vice versa coming back.... The time implications are important. Time as a new dimension has come into view. The temporal insistence (the time it takes to view the variations as a whole or the time spent in waiting for the variations to be revealed) is the real difference here. It's a different realism: space has become time.[15]

This concern with temporality, Chambers well realized, points him toward the cinema. Regarding the statement above, Woodman asked: "Do these experiments come out of your interest in filmmaking?" Chambers responded;

> There is a direct influence. These silver paintings are instant movies....The temporal dimension belongs to movies, though only a few independent filmmakers have made use of it. In painting, descriptive space (perspective, colour modulation) equals illusion. It confuses self-awareness. Now in the commercial movie, the same thing happens with descriptive time. Lawrence on his camel at sunset, Lawrence on his camel at dawn equals Lawrence riding his camel all night. Images again for the sake of the story. You're drawn away from yourself, from your own self-awareness, to star in somebody else's fiction. Entertainment equals distraction equals false-life plot.[16]

Following the silver paintings, Chambers created a series of graphite drawings between 1967 and 1968. In these drawings, the full range of his earlier formal discoveries are pressed into the service of exploring the tension that arises from the contradiction between surface and articulated form.

Like the silver paintings, these images create the simultaneous impression of both flatness and depth. And again, as in the silver paintings, the effect of flatness is created by the elimination of the depth-structuring effects of colour, achieved through the use of a highly restricted tonal range. The depth effect is original and startling; parts of the space seem to recede from the surface of the work (as in traditional representational painting), parts to protrude forward, projecting themselves towards the viewer. This spatial illusion is created by the unusual manner in which Chambers handles tonality. In conventional chiaroscuro drawing, the artist used the whites of the paper as highlights and created progressively darker tones for the range between the highlights and the darkest shadow areas. The paper-white highlights, moreover, were also generally used to represent those portions of the scene closest to the viewer, and the darkest tones those farthest away. Since the lightest tones coincided with the paper's surface (something they tended to affirm by the fact that they were paper-white), the scene could appear to advance forward no farther than the paper's surface. Thus, the gradation of tones down from paper-white articulated an apparent recession away from this surface.

In these drawings, Chambers handled tones differently. He first covered the entire paper with a layer of graphite, establishing a mid-tone for the drawing. He added more graphite to darken certain areas, and erased some to lighten the image. Consequently, the surface of the paper, rather than representing the nearest point of the illusory space, seems to fall on a plane at middle depth, with some of the space protruding before the paper, some receding behind it.

The graphite drawings also saw Chambers develop some highly unusual and extremely clever methods for working with light. When he finished one of these drawings he repeatedly sprayed it with clear water to produce a kind of glaze. He then mounted the drawings in plexiglass and sealed liquid plastic and, sometimes, painted over the surface of the plastic with oil. The plexiglass modulates the light passing through it, producing a diffused effect. This effect was sometimes further exaggerated by an overlay of oil; the contrast between the diffuse oil overlay of the surface and the undiffused image underneath has a remarkable way of revealing the effects of light.

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The compression of the tonal range characteristic of these images also creates some interesting light effects. Like the silver paintings, some of these drawings (such as *Teacup in Madrid Window*, 1968) vary with changes in the direction from which they are illuminated or in the point-of-view from which they are observed, appearing sometimes clear and distinct, sometimes hazy and indistinct. Again, Chambers uses the device to suggest the familiarly idealist notion of the subjective relativity of perception.

One additional device Chambers uses in these works merits separate comment. The glaze and the plexiglass act as reflective surfaces which form images of the viewer or of the environment in which the works are hung.[17] The effect of these images is complex. For one thing, their use further complicates the "light effects" which Chambers creates in the drawings; to the effects created by transmitted light, they add effects created by reflected light. Too, these reflected images add further elements to the already complicated montage of figures and frames which compose the works. But the most significant contribution is to the work's temporal construction. The superimposition of reflected images upon those drawn on paper involves, in effect, the superimposition of an image of the present upon an image from the past. The tension between past and present is one which, we have seen, is characteristic of the experience of representational painting. With his graphite drawings, Chambers has reworked this tension and modified its nature. For one thing, the montage construction of many of these drawings allows the works to admit different times, including the present, into the work. This in itself is a very significant revision, for, in the case of traditional painting, the past — the "historical time" of the represented scene — had been pitted against the present — the time of viewing — in a simple relation of opposition. Furthermore, in the variation of these images with changes in ambient light or the observer's point of view, Chambers found a material form for embodying the relativity of the idea of the present that traditional painting had effectively occluded.

A final result of the use of these reflected images follows from the shadowy, one might even say fragile, character of their existence. This character results from the fact that they depend for their existence on the way the viewer positions himself in relation to the image and on the conditions of the ambient light. And this gives them an almost subjective existence. Thus, the use of devices which create reflected images can be considered as another of Chambers' idealizing strategies. More specifically, it suggests the process by which consciousness superimposes its own elusive forms upon images transmitted to it from the outer world. The imposing of such a mental form upon the external world is a process described in many Romantic lyrics.

This concern with light relates these images to photographic images. The quality of their detail also affirms a resemblance between the media of drawing and photography. The powdered graphite creates a screen of dots from which the image "congeals." This screen of dots closely resembles the grain of a photographic image.

In some of the graphite drawings, too, the edges of objects possess soft outlines. This soft-edge quality resembles the soft-focus quality of some photographic images. But at the same time, this softness can be compared to the indistinctness of much of our mental imagery. The soft focus of these drawings, then, invites comparison with properties of both photographic imagery and mental imagery. The similarity between the properties of these two forms of images will become, as we shall see, one of the *données* of Chambers' film work.

If these works show a strong influence of the formal characteristics of photographic representation, they also reveal a strong influence of the cinema. Frequently they are composed of a number of separate, though related, images which often are juxtaposed in such a way as to create what one might refer to as an "openform narrative." In *Regatta No. 1* (1968), for example, each image constitutes a moment in the story of a family tragedy, the drowning of a young son in a regatta.[18] Though the story is not entirely clear, the effect of the juxtapositions of the various images is intensely disturbing. In part, this is at-

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tributable to the eerie stillness that pervades the work.[19] More important though is the effect of the montage construction. The fragmentation of the narrative effectively lifts the story outside of any real, "historical" time and transforms it into a subjective construct. This act of synthesis involves a process of "re-membering" or "re-collection" in both the senses in which those words might be taken. It elicits, then, an act of reflection. That which is reflected upon is necessarily something past; consequently a sense of things past is inscribed in the work through the use of the fragmented narrative. But alongside this sense of the pastness of experience, there exists a sense of the present which is elicited by the viewer's engagement with the work. The anxiety arising from the tension between these two temporal modes intimates that fear of transience which seems to haunt so much of Chambers' work and which accounts for so much of its power.

The relationship between the various images in the painting *The Hart of London* (1968) is equally noteworthy. A strip of small images on the right-hand side of this work depicts various attempts to entrap and shoot a deer, the larger image on the left, a reaction to those attempts. Collectively, these images constitute a narrative, with each separate image representing a discrete moment of that narrative.[20] Chambers seems to have laden his montage formation with narrative import because the response to a narrative involves that same tension between conflicting qualities of time that Chambers so frequently exploited throughout his *oeuvre*. A narrative demands on the one hand that the viewer consider it as a linear form in which the various events exist in a temporal sequence, each of whose successive events comes into existence and then passes away. On the other hand, the narrative form also possesses an architectonic which must be grasped as a whole, not in succession, and in which time is a principle of order, not of existence. From the one standpoint, then, the narrative events are successive and fleeting, while from the other they are eternal. A narrative, by its very nature, involves a tension between the fleeting and the eternal, between the past and the present, between the part and the whole. Chambers exaggerates this tension by using a form in which a number of "frozen moment" images, representing distinct phases of the action, are presented simultaneously. Thus he uses the part-whole relations of the narrative to suggest the relation between the fleeting moment and eternity. The close relation between the form of construction of this narrative and its content, which involves the slaughter of innocent deer, demands no analysis.[21]

The fact that the works depend for their impact on the synthesis of a number of elements reflects Chambers' thought on the nature of experience. Insistently throughout his career, Chambers devised strategies which point out that "experience gets put together in pieces," that in forming experience the mind synthesizes discrete elements, and that each element of an experience derives its impact from its relation to the whole. For this reason, many of the works of this period include a number of images which seem to revolve around a single emotional centre as though they were associations being made with a single "felt theme." Chambers' use of forms based on fragmentation, unlike that of artists of a more materialist persuasion, was not designed to make evident the constructed character of the object. His use of these strategies is for idealist rather than materialist ends. Reinforced by the dated content of the images (the fashions people wear, or certain objects such as automobiles, reveal the era in which the source photo was taken), by their incipient narratives (many of which suggest decay, death or the passing of time), and by the subjective character of the associational relations between the various images (which, as I commented above, suggests the act of remembering itself), the fragmentary character of these works implies the synthesizing activity of mind. Thus the object of inquiry in Chambers' paintings and drawings (though this is not true of his films) is primarily the act of awareness, not the material art object itself. Insofar as the material art object is the subject of scrutiny, it is examined not as an aesthetic construct but rather for the clues that it might provide about consciousness.

These works represent the culmination of

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the constructive phase of Chambers' painted works. Through the emphasis he puts on the character of these works as assemblages, Chambers suggests the synthetic character of perception. In the next phase of his painting, the Perceptual Realist period, there is much less evidence of the constructed character of the artwork; in fact, such evidence is deliberately suppressed. The films of this period, however, insist upon revealing themselves as assemblages. The reason for this difference between Chambers' work in two media demands an explanation. But before advancing that explanation we must consider the thoughts he held on painting during this time.

The period of "Perceptual Realism," which spans the years between 1968 and 1977,[22] includes most of the work upon which his popular fame largely rests. Chambers set down his thoughts on Perceptual Realism in an article which appeared in *artscanada* in 1969. This article is so rich in insight, despite its rather tortuous style, that it merits quotation at some length:

> The organic process of nature which man shares is the way mankind as fruit is shaped on his tree and by all in which the tree is rooted. This process containing each man and animating him from within and from without is also the process by which he spontaneously emits to the outside world again.[23] I call this primary pattern which sways back and forth through man and nature and is the sense of all the moving parts of the moving whole, 'perception.'
>
> The intention to imitate experience by art-craft I call perceptual realism.
>
> The senses constellate to experience the impact (of an object of experience) as a total experience, registering the entity as a complex.
>
> Before the camera was invented painters developed a painterly style to compensate for the lack of visual information available to them. A constantly changing scene with no way of freezing the instant offered the painter little alternative but to find some intentional means of expressing the unity he felt for the thing he was experiencing.
>
> Style filled the gap, as it were, where the artist had no more specific references to go on: the personality of the artist conceived stylistic innovations that became his hallmark; where style deteriorated into a mannerism painting derived from the lyrical ego and mind — aesthetics the primary import. When style is the intention and unifying element of a work...the aesthetic object fixed as it is in time does not embody the presence of now.
>
> What happens in general is that natural phenomena remain invisible to the conditioned mind: it prefers a substitute as stereotype to making personal contact with visible experience....The impact on the perceiver *looking through the visible to a general vision awareness* will register impartiality an experience because it is not intercepted by mind.
>
> The integration value of a foto as a new tool for perceptual awareness resides in the camera being able to do its description job so well. The printed colour description renders absolute space-time license as lyricism, subjective relativity and emotional impurities that haphazardly deform and exaggerate objective reality.
>
> Since the nature of perception and its experience is spontaneous, there is, in receiving some experiences, an enthusiastic response to the beautiful which, annunciated can be: 'WOW'. The beautiful impact has the effect of bursting in and knocking you over before your door is all the way open.... The more we become familiar with experiences that perception brings, the more we become aware of the inherent gentleness of oneself with things. So gentleness of reception is also a communication that influences the outside world. Finally, perception itself becomes a forgotten awareness that just *is* with all the common naturalness of these

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common things seen out the window or inside the house or any place.[24]

Most will find the language of the passage familiar, for in it Chambers is stating his personal reformulation of the aesthetics of Romantic idealism. The major benchmarks of that tradition, the concept of nature as organic and of art as growing out of nature like a living being,[25] the sense of the numinous in nature,[26] the belief that man's creative faculties are animated by drives also found in nature, the valorization of artist as visionary observer, the notion that art derives from a higher order of awareness,[27] can all be found in this passage.

Indeed, for Chambers as for the Romantics, seeing is not just another form of knowing, but the *highest* form of knowing. Unlike the empiricists (and the expansiveness of Blake's arguments against Locke is some measure of the distance which separates the Romantics from the empiricists on this matter), the Romantics did not believe that seeing — or any other form of sensing for that matter — involves merely the presentation of raw sense data which are later organized by the higher intellective faculties. They understood it, rather, as a form of knowledge which, inasmuch as it involves a synthetic activity, is complete, well-formed and capable itself of providing ultimate knowledge. Because perception, and this is especially true of vision, involves an organizing activity, no higher faculty is needed to organize the material it presents.

His belief in the active character of the perceptual process explains another of Chambers' reasons for attaching such value to the visionary experience. Vision, when understood as an activity of the subject, can be seen to be instrumental in fashioning the world of which the subject is aware. The intellectual act opens up a gap between the subject and the object. Indeed a distance, a separating out of the subject from the object, seems necessary to the analytic enterprise. In vision, however, this gap is closed. In the act of vision, the subject-object dyad is fused into a monad, for the subject creates, through the act of perception, the very thing of which he is aware.

Even the experience which Chambers refers to with the term "WOW" can be understood within the framework of orthodox Romantic thought. In fact, one of the most obvious frameworks for understanding the experience would be Coleridge's famous distinction between Reason and Understanding. Both are faculties that join together separate things or ideas (for example, the ideas of redness and a ball). Understanding joins separate ideas only according to the mechanistic principles of association. Reason is an altogether higher faculty; it reduces multiplicity to unity, or succession to an instant. It unites subject and object. It achieves the organic fusion rather than the mechanical juxtaposition of parts produced by the Understanding. And in doing so, it produces a uniquely ecstatic awareness.

This ecstatic awareness, what Chambers calls the "WOW" experience, is embodied in the timeless character of the Perceptual Realist painting. By freezing a single moment and rendering it with intricate detail, Chambers makes the momentary action depicted in the work seem eternal. The experience suggested is one of transcendence of the realm of change, and accession to a realm of changelessness, timelessness, even (and this is particularly true of the later Perceptual Realist paintings) peacefulness.

This "frozen moment" quality of painting suggests that vision is a lofty form of awareness, for it implies that what is known in that luminous moment of vision is beyond change and so belongs to a higher order of being. But the frozen moment is also a characteristic feature of photographic vision. Chambers, it seems, compared the vision characteristic of a photograph with the vision attained in the moment of ecstatic awareness; given the resemblance he discovered between the two, it is a small wonder that he should have used photographs as models on which to fashion his Perceptual Realist paintings, or that the cinema should have exerted such a strong attachment for him.

Indeed, in formulating the theory of Perceptual Realism, Chambers stressed the importance of photography, in particular the role played by photography in revealing certain features of human vision. Chambers firmly opposed the idea that the invention of the camera had rendered obsolete painting's traditional enterprise of creat-

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ing a likeness of the observed world and had left for the painter only formal problems with which to deal. Chambers insisted that the invention of the camera has helped to further the realization of the age-old aspiration for realistic painting, since it enabled the painter to progress even farther in pursuit of objectively accurate description. The reason for this, Chambers stated, lay in the "completeness" of the camera's record. A photographic record, Chambers pointed out, is complete in every detail. Thus, with the invention of photography a painter was no longer forced to invent details when his record or memory of an event or scene was incomplete, for, by analyzing a photographic record of the scene, he could obtain accurate information about the event he was depicting complete down to the minutest detail.

Chambers claimed that this rendered possible the development of styleless painting. The claim is interesting. He alleges that before the development of the camera, the information available to the painter concerning details of the scene he was involved in rendering was incomplete. It was this incompleteness, according to Chambers, that forced the painter to invent devices to fill in the missing details. In doing so, the painter projected aspects of his personality into the picture. Since the development of the camera, information on scenes complete in every detail has become available. Thus, Chambers contends, the contemporary painter need no longer fill in the gaps in his record of an event with details drawn from his psyche. With the development of the camera, the conditions which had required painters to rely on devices influenced by the painter's subjectivity had passed and completely objective description had become possible. Representational painting had, at last, come to a point where it could fulfill its original ambition.

Even Chambers' ideal of styleless painting can be related to his commitment to Romantic ideas. Though most Romantics have held that the work of art is an expression of the self, throughout the history of Romantic endeavour there has persisted an alternate notion. This alternate notion finds exemplary expression in Emerson's essay, "Nature." In a famous passage, he describes how, when he visits Nature, "all mean egoism vanishes." He says, further: "I become a transparent eyeball; I *am* nothing. I *see* all."[28] While the much exalted ego of the more orthodox version of Romanticism finds expression in style, and particularly in the evidence of brushwork, the transcendence of ego — or at least of the *limited* ego — described by Emerson was traditionally suggested by a meticulous realism that effaced all evidence of style and brushstroke so that no alien presence could interpose itself between the image and the spectator. The work of the American Luminists (Fitz Hugh Lane, Martin Johnson Meade, John F. Kensett, Stanford Robinson Gifford, Jasper F. Cropsey and Frederic Edwin Church) exemplifies both the style and its motivation.

This alien presence was understood as including not only the self of the painter, but also of the painted surface itself. The reasons for this occultation of the material features of the artwork are important to understand. Almost without fail, the idea of transcendence of the self has been associated with the ambition to create a painting that appeared to be a pure construct of light. However, a painting is not really a construct of light, but merely of paint. Should the fact that he is looking at a painting obtrude itself upon the viewer's consciousness, then he would realize that he is not dealing with a construct of light but rather with a mere representation of light — that he is looking at a mere *image* of a higher level reality and not that higher level reality itself. But attributing to artwork the status of imitation contradicts the claim, so essential to the Romantic credo, that a work of art, because it is brought forth by the same creative process as produces the realm of nature, possesses the same degree of reality as the objects of nature. It is for this reason that nearly all Luminist painting has found it necessary to disguise the very materials of which it is made and to adopt a meticulously realistic style.

There lurks here a problem that threatens to subvert the entire Luminist programme, including Chambers' reworking of that programme. The problem is that a painting *is* a construct, *is* something an individual creator creates by hand — the suppression of evidence in the brushstroke not

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withstanding. A painting is not really a construction in light, but only gives the illusion of being so; in reality, it is composed of paints, of pigments, of darks rather than light. Thus Luminist painting is forced, by the incompatibility between its ambitions and the materials with which it has to work, to be deceptive, to be something less than completely honest about its material and its methods. Film, on the other hand, truly *is* a construction in light, and one that does not, as Bazin states,[29] demand the intervention of a maker. The cinema therefore was an ideal form for Chambers to realize his programme of Perceptual Realism, for in it he could honestly and fully embody his Luminist convictions.

There is a further reason why Chambers should have turned to cinema at this time. His statement makes clear that the concept of perception upon which his theory of Perceptual Realism is based involves the view that the act of perception is a synthetic one, that in it a number of discrete elements are joined together in a luminous moment of insight. From this understanding of the nature of perception derives some of the informing structures of the film *Circle*.

Let us begin with a description of the film. The film consists of three parts. The middle portion of the film, by far its longest section, is a series of 365 four-second long shots of a backyard, each taken from very nearly the same place, with lenses of the same field of view and with the same lens opening.[30] Preceding and succeeding this portion of the film are passages which have the appearance of being much less highly structured. The opening passage consists of footage showing, in order of appearance: a monochrome field; an unidentifiable object that appears merely as an area in relief; concentric circles of light; the handprinted title "Circle" in superimposition; the concentric circles of light; the unidentifiable object; the title "by Jack Chambers" handprinted on a piece of paper that is divided into rectangles of varying tones; a light fixture hanging from a ceiling (which remains on the screen for a comparatively long time); a person (Jack Chambers himself) winding a movie camera, then bending over to rephotograph a series of still pictures of the same backyard we see in the central portion of the film (these stills appear to be taken from the same vantage point and with apparently the same field of view as the images in the central portion of the film; they may even be still prints of frames from the central portion of the film); a close-up of the man with a camera shooting the strip of pictures[31]; the series of pictures rising upward through the screen; the picture of the backyard swelling into an intense closeup, and finally going out of focus.

The transition to the final passage consists of a shot of the movie camera and its case lying on a table, another flare passage and a very short shot of running water. The latter two shots evoke the elemental relation between fire and water; the image of water also alludes to the idea of flow and thus makes a reference to the material of film. As the image settles, a shot depicting a woman teaching a dog to count appears. The woman asks the dog to count out a number, the dog barks the required number of times and is rewarded with a biscuit. We then see, successively: shots of wheels of a train; passengers disembarking from a train; a procession of people disembarking and stacking their luggage into a line; a procession of people walking downstairs (probably at the railway station); a crowd breaking up and getting into cars; a man feeding a machine with a long rod of flexible stripped material which is first bent into a nearly sinusoidal shape and then cut into separate portions which, it becomes evident, are candies; a woman pouring these candies into a Christmas stocking; people swimming in a stream; some men milling around a culvert and then disappearing into it; a number of people swimming in a large stream; two children dragging their boots in muddy ground to make two continuous tracks; two girls writing in snow or heavy dew on the rear window of a car; three children lifting a fourth onto a large snowbird, then running away in a line pursued by the fourth; a close-up of the head of a large bird; a flock of birds flying in the sky; people shooting movie-film of a bird flying; a single bird flying; and finally, a hand opening to reveal a still bird which, shortly after the hand opens, flies away. Throughout this passage, there occurs intermittently, in short bursts, a circular figure in the upper right

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hand corner of the screen.

The film begins with a prolonged passage during which the screen is filled with a homogeneous pinkish-beige/sepia colour field. On the soundtrack there occur periodically bursts of white noise. The extended duration of the passage together with the rhythmical reoccurrence of this sound has a settling effect upon the viewer, leading him to a contemplative response.

The camera sweeps about the room; as objects are crossed, they divide in the screen into different sectors. Finally, the camera settles and the first clear image of the film comes into view. It begins as an out-of-focus circle of light and only gradually comes into focus. We shall recognize in retrospect that this shot, beginning as a pure monochrome field out of which an object, a light, materializes, embodies the three major concerns of the film: light, the unity constructed in an act of perception, and the unity of Being or Reality. Indeed, it is a nearly perfect expression of Chambers' emanationist notions.

The titles following this introductory image develop these themes. The first title, a handprinted "Circle," refers to the overall organizing shape of the main body of the film. It denotes, then, in a concise, referential operation, a shape which is to unfold across a field of time. It also suggests the total structure of the years whose days move in a circle. The second title, also handprinted, shows first the word "By" and then, separately, "Jack Chambers." The ground on which these words are set is significant; it is composed of three vertically stacked rectangles of varying tones, each of which is similar in shape to a cinema screen or a film frame. The camera moves down the vertically arranged titles, causing the rectangles to move up the screen. The similarity of the shape of these rectangles to that of a film frame, together with their upward movement through the screen, suggests an allusion to the movement of the film through the projector.

Such an allusion has, of course, become common, at least within the context of the avant-garde film. Usually these allusions function self-referentially, commenting on the materials of the cinema medium. In this film, however, a work based upon a notion that perception is a synthetic process, the device suggests an analogy between the composition of a film, which is constructed of a number of separate frames, and the composition of a perception which, according to Chambers, is likewise constructed of a number of "bits" of information. It was precisely this analogy, amongst other things, that made the cinema so attractive to Chambers, for in the cinema he found an art form whose very basis embodied his theories of perception. The fact that he believed that the most basic cinematic structures are isomorphic with the structures of perception suggested to him that, within the arts generally, film held a privileged place in the depiction of the mode of operation of consciousness. The acceptance and defense of such an important idea implied, for an idealist like Chambers, the notion that the cinema occupies a privileged relation to that which is ultimately real. Indeed, for Chambers as for all idealists, finally, the relation between epistemology and ontology is a very close one.

The images of the opening passage are constructed of "home-movie" like footage; the sound-track consists of bursts of white noise, the hum of a camera being operated, and a song with lyrics which appear — after several viewings of the film I am still uncertain — to include the words "Come back home, come back home." The film is obviously committed to the importance of a sense of place, particularly to that personal environment which one calls home. The use of the home-movie footage was calculated to reveal that commitment. But its use serves other ends as well. Home-movie footage generally depicts events from one's past. In both content and form it resembles one's memories. Thus Chambers, in using the home-movie footage, is striving for the mimesis of consciousness. But this is not quite precise enough, for the documental nature of the home-movie footage guarantees that imagery maintains a relation to objective reality. What the home-movie footage really represents is internalized imagery — imagery that exists at the boundary where self and world meet. As we have seen, Chambers refers to such images as perceptions.

The next image in the film is that of a light bulb. The manner in which the image acquires

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its signifying function is of particular interest. The image is radically isolated, both by the tight framing of the shot and by the lack of any clear "diegetic" relation between this image and the one preceding it. This isolation forces a simple denotative function upon the image, transforming the shot into a virtual declaration that this film is about light.

Chambers' fascination for light in this film derives in part from his interest in the material nature of the cinema. But a consideration of the structure of the passage, as opposed to the individual elements of which it is composed, reveals yet another reason for this fascination. The opening images of the film consist of homogeneous colour fields — fields of light rather than images of material objects. As the camera begins to move in a scanning motion, at first a vague, then, progressively, a more sharply defined series of concentrically arranged circular figures appears. Finally, the light bulb comes into view and it becomes evident that the concentric circles emanate from a light bulb.

The passage has a clear trajectory; undifferentiated light becomes, first, a geometric pattern, and then, an object. Within the context of the Romantic concerns which animate Chambers' work, the two movements this trajectory comprises can be understood as isomorphic one with the other: the first movement charts the transition from the realm of pure being to the realm of form, the second the transition from the realm of form to the realm of material objects. The passage as a whole, then, moves down along the chain of being. There is, too, a significance to the fact that the various levels of reality are all represented within a single shot. By including them within a single shot Chambers seems to be suggesting that all these levels of reality partake of a single Being; the unity of the single shot, then, acts as an analogue for the unity of Being.

There is a similar pattern of evolution in the spatial features of various parts of the passage. The opening section, consisting of an undifferentiated colour field, affords no clues as to the nature of the space being photographed. Shortly after the concentric circles appear, the screen is bifurcated into two tones — a darker tone on the top half of the screen and a lighter tone on the bottom — of indeterminate reference. Only when we see the light fixture on the ceiling do we realize that the two tones define a ceiling and a wall. The passage then moves from unity to differentiation to material form.

The camera lingers on the light bulb for a few moments then tilts down from the ceiling, along a wall, to an area with a vertical row of windows which, like the off-white rectangles on which the credits are written, are of the same proportions as a cinema screen or a film frame. This analogy to the screen or the film frame is extended by the movement of the camera. By tilting down the windows, Chambers makes them appear to rise upward through the screen. Like the similar camera movement in the credit sequence, this movement serves to suggest the fact that a film creates the illusion of continuous motion by presenting a number of discrete frames.

In the next passage we see, from two points of view, someone open a case containing a motion picture camera, another shot of him lifting the camera, a shot of him taking film and then a shot of what he is filming. What he is filming is a piece of cardboard upon which are several photographs of a backyard arranged in two vertical rows that resemble strips of film. Again to reinforce this analogy, the camera tilts down the rows, causing them to rise upward through the screen.

During this passage, several flares of light occur. The presence of the flares serves a number of interrelated purposes: it points up the material features of the medium, deconstructs the illusion of reality, and alerts the viewer to the fact this film is, amongst other things, a film concerned with light. But it is what is implied by the interrelations of all the purposes that is of particular interest. As the flare washes over the image, it obliterates the image. Such moments effectively constitute a demonstration that light determines the being of the material object. At the same time, these moments affirm light as an essential material feature of the cinema. The interrelation between these two functions constitutes an argument that cinema is a metaphysically privileged medium, for that which constitutes a cinematic

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image is identical with that which determines the being of material objects.

A black border at the edge of the frame, and the intermittent appearance of a sprocket hole at intervals during this passage, accentuate the material of the cinematic medium. The presence of such materialist references in Chambers' films is particularly interesting in light of the fact that similar references do not appear in the Perceptual Realist paintings he made at the same time. In these paintings, he attempted to use every means possible to conceal the nature of the material from which they were constructed, or at least, to prevent it from obtruding in the viewer's consciousness. This difference between the paintings and the films is probably explained by Chambers' belief that the materials of painting can only give the illusion of presenting a moment of consciousness. The materials of cinema, on the other hand, offer structural analogues to consciousness. Thus Chambers seems to have believed that references to the materials and forms of cinema suggest aspects of the structures of consciousness, while references to the materials and forms of painting do not.

Chambers' Luminist beliefs may also help to explain the difference in the way he handled the two forms of expression. Cinema is a form that embodies light, while painting does not. At best, painting merely gives the illusion of embodying light. Revealing the true nature of the film is therefore consistent with his emanationist ideals, while reference to the real nature of painting is not. In the cinema, Chambers found a medium whose nature was inherently suited to embodying his beliefs. He did not, therefore, have to disguise its nature. His fundamental aesthetic notions allowed him to use cinema honestly and to admit to its material reality.

The sequence continues with the shot of the photographs replaced by a shot of the man with the camera. We see him winding the camera and then resuming shooting.[32] Then, once again, we are presented with an image of the photograph which he is shooting. The passage, clearly, is not merely calculated to reveal the filmmaking process, for there is nothing else in the film which even hints at the production process (as distinct from the materials and the forms of cinema). Rather, the alternation of images of shooting with images of what is being shot suggests that relation between consciousness and its object. The construction is, in fact, a phenomenological strategy, pointing to the existence of the transcendental and visionary subject behind the act of seeing. Once again, then, Chambers is pointing to that place where self and world meet. The fact that the photographs used in this alternating figure are still images of frames from the central portion of the film also implies the existence of a viewing subject for these same images. We are reminded that these are images not of the world itself, but of someone's perception of the world. The sounds used in this passage reinforce the themes suggested by the visuals. The first sounds heard accompany the undifferentiated colour field and consist simply of white noise. The "unreality" of this sound gives a metaphysical significance to the pure colour image, just as white noise is frequently used by popular music groups to connote other worldliness. For much of the rest of the passage the track is composed primarily of the alternating sounds of a camera motor being wound and of the camera motor running. The sound of the camera running reminds us that what we are seeing is the image of an event produced by a camera, not the event itself and, since a camera is used by a person, that what we are seeing is a person's perception of the world, not the world itself. Another component of the track is a song whose lyrics seem, to this listener at least (the sound is muffled and indistinct), to include the words "come back home, come back home." Chambers' interest in the home as a personalized space, a place in which self and world meet, is familiar from his paintings; it is, as we shall see, also evidenced in the film's central passage. The final component, off-screen sounds of a radio or television and of children, sets up a tension between on-screen space and off-screen space and so, by implication, between the realms of the seen and the unseen.

The manner in which the sounds of the winding and the running camera are coordinated is intriguing. At first, the sound and the image appear to be synchronized: the sound of the camera being wound occurs at the same time as

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the image of it being wound, the sound of the motor running occurs at the same time as images produced by running it appear. This form of coordination is brief, for soon the sounds and image move out of phase with one another, the sound of winding starting slightly before or after the image of that action. This temporal discrepancy increases until, at the conclusion of the passage, we see the man stop winding the camera shortly after the sound of winding begins. This lack of synchronism has an interesting effect. The use of synchronous sound and image is most often used in film for naturalistic ends. In this film, the sound produced by operating a camera begins just after the first "realistic" images appear. Here, the synchronous sound operates in its usual way to reinforce the naturalistic texture of the image. As the sound and image move progressively away from this precise synchronization, the constructed character of the sound-image relation — and so, by implication, of the film — becomes evident.

The deconstruction of the illusion described here does not serve exclusively — or even primarily — the end of self-reflexive inquiry. Rather it serves to remind us of the essential fragility of the illusion of reality and, by extension, of our perception of reality, for it reveals that the illusion depends upon the precise coordinator of elements which are, by nature, diverse and unrelated.

The passage concludes with an image produced by moving the camera in on the photographs so closely that their features become blurred, followed by a dissolve which concludes with the appearance of an image with the same object matter[33] as was seen in the still photographs, but now in colour. The dissolve acts as a transitional device leading into the film's central portion. To summarize the importance of the opening passage, we could say that it has served to suggest the important role of light in this work, to define various levels of reality in the work (object matter, filmic construct, transcendental reality) and to suggest a homology between certain structural features of the film and structural features of perception. The central passage of the film develops these ideas further.

This passage consists of something like three hundred and sixty-five four-second long shots of a backyard, all taken from very nearly the same position as were the black and white photographs in the previous section. To be specific, the shots all show a backyard with a tree on the right-hand edge, a clothesline running through the left of the frame at an angle, a tree in the centre at the far edge of the lot and, beyond that, the back of a rather large house. Within this extremely rigid framework, there are significant variations in the shots. These variations are primarily of six different kinds. First, the framing and field of view sometimes alter slightly, but significantly, between shots. Second, incidental object matter, included in the shots, undergoes frequent change: objects, or on a few occasions, people, appear in one shot and disappear in the next, or a few shots later. Third, the appearance of the yard undergoes seasonally related changes: the tree leaves are first green, then coloured[34]; the leaves on the trees become sparser while foliage accumulates on the ground; later, snow appears. Fourth, while most of the second shots include at least some minimal movement, some do not, but appear to be freeze-frames. Fifth, the shots possess various degrees of distinctness: at times they are quite sharp, at others, quite blurred; the space of the softer focus images appears shallower, of the sharper focus images, deeper. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the intensity of light varies from shot to shot. The conformity of the changes in the intensity of light with factors related to atmospheric conditions (e.g. presence or absence of shadows, haze or mist) suggests that these variations are the result of Chambers' decision not to use those techniques photographers and filmmakers generally employ to compensate for the naturally occurring variations in light intensity. Thus, one supposes, these variations simply reflect the change in light from day to day. They are, in a sense, the direct rendering of nature on film, not the creation of the filmmaker.

It is obvious that the form of this section is based on the cycle of the year, with each shot representing a day within that cycle. The form also suggests a concern with time. As in the silver paintings, this is revealed primarily in the way the work structures light; the fluctuations in the in-

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tensity of light define the passage of time. And as with much Romantic art in general, and with Chambers' "montage constructions" in particular, concepts of time and death are interrelated in the formal structure of the piece. The appearance or disappearance of objects and people in successive shots suggests both the passing of time and the transitory nature of existence.

But further precision on the relation between the film's form and these metaphysical concerns is required. The object matter of the film is of two sorts: firstly, the scene — the backyard that is recorded along with the objects and people which populate it from time to time — and secondly, the continuously changing light. Of the two, the light is clearly the more important; the evidence for this lies in the fact that while the changes in light have an essential relation to the form of the film, changes in the scene have only an accidental relation to it. The implication of this is that Chambers sees light as having a greater metaphysical significance, a higher reality value than ordinary matter. Indeed, the fact that the circular form of this section suggests the idea of wholeness, and the fact that this form is based on the modulation of light imply that Chambers perceives a relation between the light and the idea of the whole. What exactly this relation is remains to be specified.

The form of this section provides further insight into the reasons for Chambers' attraction to the cinema. For Chambers, light is the ultimate reality. The fact that changes in the intensity of the film's image from day to day were not really created by the filmmaker, but resulted from his decision to allow the film to respond to the day-by-day changes in light in ways determined by its inherent properties, establishes that, for Chambers, there exists a relationship between the inherent characteristic of film and ultimate reality. Since the film naturally registers the effects of this reality, Chambers implies, there must be some sort of affinity between the characteristics of the film medium and the properties of what we could call the "Ultimate Being." Someone holding these beliefs would likely hold an additional one, namely that amongst all the arts, the cinema occupies a privileged position because of its affinity with the Ultimate Being.

This decision not to adjust the camera to compensate for the daily variations in light hints at yet another reason why Chambers was attracted to the cinema. In other words, the strategy appears to have been designed to allow one form of nature, the film's recording emulsion, to make, by natural processes alone (for human intervention is unnecessary), an image of another form of nature — in fact, the highest form of nature, light. The strategy, then, was designed to reveal that cinema is the instrument that can unleash that creative power which is inherent in the highest order of natural being, the power to create an image of itself. In a sense, it is a strategy design to incarnate the Romantic ideal for a work of art.

But it is not on the metaphysical significance of the work that I wish to dwell, however.[35] Rather, I want to deal with its epistemological aspects and, more precisely, to demonstrate how formal and perceptual inquiry converge in this work. The nature of this convergence can be understood by considering the form of segmentation used in the central passage. Because each of the shots in this section is of a predetermined (four second) duration, many of the incidents which are depicted in the section — any that exceeded the predetermined length — are left incomplete and so without any apparent connection to actions which precede or succeed them. Furthermore, the changes of intensity of illumination are not gradual and progressive, but abrupt, changing suddenly, exactly when a new shot begins. Consequently, each shot in the film acts as though it were a separate unit. The distinctness of these units one from another alludes to what must have been, for Chambers, one of the most intriguing properties of the cinematic medium, namely the discreteness of the individual frames of a film. This point is strengthened by the slight variation in field of view from shot to shot, which bears a strong resemblance to the slight changes that occur between the frames of a shot in an ordinary film. In fact, the entire central passage of the film closely resembles the effect that would be created by slightly distending a film until each individual frame became perceptible.[36]

One must ask why Chambers so stressed the

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fact that a film is composed of separate frames. We have already seen that, for Chambers, perception is a synthetic act in which discrete pieces of information are synthesized. Chambers recognized that the structural principles of the cinema are the same as those of perception and that, for this reason, the cinema was the ideal medium for embodying his insights about perception. Explorations into the material and form of the cinematic medium would lead to insights about the nature of perception itself.

The monomorphic form of this section of the film is of a type quite uncharacteristic of Chambers' *oeuvre*. The orthodox function of such form depends upon the attempt to reduce media to their essence by refusing to create effects which depend upon the use of anything accidental, anything not essential to their natures. Chambers' use of monomorphic form is somewhat more complex. His belief in homology between the structures of cinema and the structures of perception implied that the discovery, by reductive means, of the essence of the cinema would provide insight into the nature of perception as well. Thus the use of a reductive form could serve the ends not only of artistic self-inquiry but also of perceptual and epistemological inquiry.

The monomorphic form operates in other ways which can be discovered by considering the effects it has on the viewer's state of consciousness. The extreme repetitiveness of this section of the film, its lack of large-scale variations, its protracted duration and its sound track, which consists at first of monotonic sounds produced by electronic or mechanical means, later of polytonic sounds produced by the same means, all operate to induce in the viewer a self-reflexive state of consciousness, a state of consciousness in which the viewer is aware of his conscious processes. At the same time, the similarity of the images prompts the viewer to make comparisons between them and to construct a coherent pattern from them. The mind is forced into a process in which it attempts to construct a whole from a number of discrete parts and in which it is, at the same time, attentive to its activity. Thus, in this way too, aesthetic inquiry (inquiry into part-whole relations in film) and epistemological inquiry (inquiry into the mind's activity in forging these and, by extension, other analogous part-whole relations) fuse.

Not only does the film suggest that the form of unity which characterizes a perception is similar to the form of unity which characterizes a work of art, it also suggests that that same form of unity characterizes a period of time, for it shows the whole that is a year to be composed of a number of discrete parts, i.e. days. Chambers, then, suggests that the structure of a work of art, a perception and a period of time are all homologous. And this, in turn, suggests that consciousness and cosmos have the same structure as does a work of art.

To understand the significance of this homology, we must again explore the circular form and the dominant role played by light. Both features suggest that the unity of the work of art is an analogue for the unity of Being, a unity which subsumes all differences between particular things. Thus, the unity of a work of art — or at least, this particular work of art — is an analogue for The Ultimate Reality, The One. But if this is so, according to the homology which Chambers has established, the synthetic character of a perception must also resemble the form of unity which characterizes Ultimate Reality. Perception, like a work of art, and like reality itself, involves the resolution of tension between opposites — a resolution which leads to establishing a condition of harmony and peace. Thus, for Chambers, epistemology is not just an intellectual discipline, but a moral one, for the act which it studies leads to a discovery of the peace that lies at the heart of apparently conflicting elements. And thus, making art is, for Chambers, a means for reflecting this moral activity, a vocation.

The intimation of a realm in which all differences are overcome provides some of the film's most powerful emotional effects. Throughout the central section of the film, objects and people appear briefly and then vanish. Thus Chambers shows that existence is transient and fleeting. At the same time, however, the form of the film implies that all things are part of a higher realm in which all differences are overcome, including the difference between existence and non-existence, between life and death. Thus the film balances

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the tragic sense of the transience of individual things with a peacefulness that comes from knowing that, while individual things pass, the whole does not. In a note, written in 1972, Chambers stated that "if you were totally convinced that we do not really die, that there is no pessimistic death as we understand it, the feeling you may have by believing this is a closeness, a friendship for the animate and inanimate things around you. You may feel that the objects in nature, nature itself, is easily loved — your love for life is the celebration that life does not diminish or end."[37] This sense of the gentle relationship with the loved environment and of the vulnerability of important people and objects explains much of this passage's impact.

The final section acts as a kind of gloss on the film's middle section. Like the middle section, it consists of imagery dealing with the relationship between parts and wholes. Near the opening of this section, we see crowds of passengers disembarking from a train. This mass of people is then broken down, by the use of close-ups, into several units. Somewhat later, a large tube of some unidentifiable, flexible stripped material is shown; we then see this single mass being cut into a number of separate candies which are then seen being placed into a Christmas stocking — a new whole. So the section proceeds, constructing one part-whole relation after another; the first sequence in the passage shows a dog counting out numbers — each number is a whole consisting of several individual units (barks); children are seen writing words (the wholes) by making marks (the parts) in the snow or heavy dew that covers an automobile windshield; a flock of birds (the whole) is shown, then a close-up of a single bird (the parts).

While this section of the film is thematically related to its central portion, it is also a complement to that passage for it possesses several quite distinctive features. It is composed of newsreel-like footage. Like the opening passage, the film as a whole progresses through a number of distinct stages. It begins with images of pure light, moves to images depicting "ordinary reality" (which Chambers calls "consensus reality") modulated by light, and concludes with images of that "consensus reality" represented in the newsreel footage. These three classes of imagery suggest three levels of reality: light alone (i.e. ultimate reality); light giving form to matter; and finally, ordinary matter itself. The film's structure follows the pattern of ontology laid out in emanationist philosophy. The three-part form of the film, like so many other features of the work, is informed by Chambers' meta-physical notions.

The fact that footage in the final section of the film is documental in character has other significances. The documentary footage in this section announces itself as a record of bygone events.[38] For this reason, it creates an elegaic, reflective tone. This tone is very much in keeping with the essential tension of the central passage of the film, the tension between a sense of vulnerability and loss, elicited by the recognition of the transience of things, and the sense of peace that comes from knowing that, finally, there is no difference between being and not being, between life and death. The nostalgic reflection evoked by the documentary footage itself incorporates a similar tension, for, even though the actual events depicted in the footage have gone out of existence, photographic records of events do endure.

The collage-type character of the passage, the fact that it is composed from disparate fragments showing events that are unrelated in space and time, stands in opposition to the monomorphic shape of the central passage. The fact that various events depicted in the passage could not all occur in any continuum of real space and time suggests that the footage represents not events actually occurring in "the real world" but rather images occurring in consciousness. These images are to be taken as interior images, images that belong to the imagination. Accordingly, the collage-type construction used in this passage can be taken as demonstrating the synthetic character of the imaginative process. So too, Chambers' demonstration of the enduring character of a photographic record can be taken as a demonstration that consciousness sustain Being.

Periodically throughout this section of the film there occurs a graphic circle in the top right hand corner of the screen. It is an emblem of wholeness, of completeness. It bears mentioning, however, that this symbol occurs in Chambers'

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early work as far back as *Slaughter of the Lamb* (1961) and *Five Shepherds* (1961-2). It reappears, too, in his later film, *The Hart of London* (1970).

More explicitly even than the middle section, the end section associates the idea of an ultimate reality with the idea of death. At one point, we are shown workers standing near a culvert, ready to enter. The light outside the culvert and the darkness inside suggest life and death. At a later point, we see a hand opening to reveal a bird which at first, seems dead but which suddenly takes flight; the sequence provides, then, an image of death giving birth to life. Hence life and death, too, move in a circle. Life gives way to death; death produces life.

We have seen that the type of discourse Chambers offers is metaphysical in nature. But, more importantly, we have seen that associated with his metaphysical credos — in fact an integral part of them — is a set of beliefs about the nature of perception, and intuition, beliefs that could properly be called epistemological. Indeed, Chambers' artwork was consistently committed to the task of exploring questions regarding the nature of perception, the process by which perceptions are formed, and the extent to which they can be considered to be accurate to "the real world." And, finally, we have seen that, in his film work, Chambers examined the nature of the image the artwork offers us in order to explore the nature of perception. In no way can Chambers' work fairly be accused of having skirted key issues concerning the role and accuracy of the image.

These remarks should not have to be made. It seems, however, they do. It is not that Chambers' films themselves have been singled out for attack; in fact, the almost complete lack of interest in his extraordinary films quite distresses me. The entire tradition to which Chambers' works belong is being swept aside. In virtually all contemporary criticism,[39] the Romantic cinema has been a victim of the struggle to valorize materialist film practices. To further their efforts, those committed to materialist practices have cast the struggle as a battle between good and evil. Romantic cinema (and Romantic art in general) is accused of being expressionistic, while the materialist cinema is praised for being analytic; the Romantic cinema is said to exploit illusion, the materialist cinema to question it; the Romantic cinema is said to put the spectator in a passive role, the materialist cinema to engage him actively.[40] Chambers' art — and this should be true of all art — exploits and questions the powers of the image at the same time. "Work on the image," as it is sometimes fashionably termed, is not the exclusive preserve of those engaging in materialist practices. Nor is it a matter of degree, of the materialists committing a greater portion of their energies to rigorous formal and epistemological inquiry. Rather it is a question — and this was the point of my tracing parallel traditions of epistemology and of illustrating one of them with a study of Chambers' work — of different assumptions about the scope and nature of epistemological problems. For most Romantics, epistemology and metaphysics are closely related; for them, to be valid, the study of perception must be based on a study of the nature of man and of his relation to the cosmos. In no way, however, is the Romantic tradition less analytical or less inquiring than the materialist. Indeed, I am prompted to wonder how anyone who had read Coleridge or Wordsworth could put forward, or assent to, much of the nonsense about the distinction between Romantic art and "modernist" art that passes today as criticism.

NOTES

1. A few of the key texts of the critical school to which I am here referring are: Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, Ltd., 1914); Roger Fry, "Some Questions in Aesthetics" in *Transformations* (London: Chatto & Windus, Ltd., 1926) and "Retrospect" in *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, Ltd., 1920) and Edward Bullogh, " 'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle" in *British Journal of Psychology*, V, 1912, pp. 87-98.
   My remarks are an oversimplification of the views of these and related thinkers.
2. I should like to caution against the tendency to situate all "reductionist" artwork within this line of development. There are two separate lines of development which involve the use of simple or reduced forms. One, stemming from Matisse and Miro, represents the quest for pure organic forms. These artists' methods of production have been primarily intuitive and their ends metaphysical. Another line of development stems from Constructivism and analytical Cubism. Artists belonging to this tradition have viewed the production of artwork as the incarnation of an intellectual act; their styles have been objective rather than organic, and their arena of discourse more epistemological and scientific than metaphysical and speculative. It is clearly with this second line of development that we are concerned here.
3. A paradigmatic figure in this field of endeavour is Stan Brakhage whose series of films constitutes an ongoing attempt to embody the complex texture of this experience.

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4. I say "with qualification" because Snow's work bears a more than vestigial allegiance to the visionary tradition. *La Région Centrale*, in fact, must surely be considered as easily situating itself within that tradition. This is no comment on his importance as a filmmaker, which is beyond dispute.
5. I am here speaking of the years from about 1963 (when, I believe, Chambers' work comes into its own) onwards. The first style discussed belongs to the period 1963-65.
6. Such uses of "assemblage" are obviously correlatives of the montage construction of the cinema.
7. These works were preceeded by a series of expressionistic-looking paintings that seem decidedly derivative.
8. Ross Woodman, *Chambers* (Toronto; The Coach House Press, 1967), p. 11.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
10. This idea that perception was a synthesizing process was one important to the work of Cezanne and the Cubists. In fact, Chambers' work is very Cezannesque; like Cezanne, his views of the synthetic nature of perception led him to the dismemberment of spatial system characteristic of realist and impressionist art.
11. The Preludes, *Book XII*.
12. Features of the photographic process he was to work with extensively when he came to make his important film, *Hart of London*.
13. Chambers himself has testified to his personal sense of importance in the merging of the familiar in discovering the marvellous:

> "The Castillian landscape was something impenetrable for me. It was something I desired to become by entering it, but never could and never did. The landscape was a beautiful mystery: the human odour seemed to reside in it so that a vista of several miles in that clear and machineless light seemed a particle of torso under a microscope. The hills were rubbed bare by wool and hand had touched every inch of them. There was an organism within an organism that appeared as landscape. But I knew that I was not inside. Returning to Canada, over a couple of years, the seasons uncovered images of myself still gesturing in the invisible. A few visual appearances possessed a fundamental legibility. There appeared memories of some boyhood incidents that had a dimension beyond the incidents themselves. Such incidents (diving from a train bridge into the Thames) divided into vortex and periphery, the periphery or accompanying memories being absorbed into the centre of the essential gesture. This synthesis, invisible in time, was an experience of reality, a revelation, an experience of an organism within an organism that had accepted me as its centre. This was the basis of my decision to stay in Canada."

14. Developing the epistemological line of argument: these paintings are remarkable for the way they force upon the viewer certain questions raised by the traditional arguments from illusions so important in idealist philosophers.
15. Woodman, *op. cit.*, p. 15. The lexis here is interesting. The reference to revelation is hardly unusual in writings of those of idealist persuasion.
16. Woodman, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-17. Chambers here is articulating the view, described at the beginning of this essay, that what is dangerous about illusionism is that it distracts one from the artwork itself and so saps the aesthetic experience of intensity. No political critique is implied.
17. A photograph, too, it should be noted, includes this sort of play between transmitted and reflected light in its very nature.
18. This work is also remarkable for the fact that on the right hand side of it, there is a strip of images which exhibit negative-for-positive reversal of tones. This feature of the work constitutes a further similarity with the formal characteristics of photographic representation, one that Chambers had quite intensely explored in the silver paintings.
19. This sense of stillness is created by "freezing" a moment which possesses incipient movement; the sense of incipient movement itself is created by the dynamizing effect of the diagonal which predominates the composition.
20. A belief confirmed by the fact that the various images of the hart in flight show it at different distances from the fence toward which it is running. Each image, then, represents one instant from the total act.
21. The fact that the narrative this picture relates is concerned with death suggests a familiarly Romantic interpretation of the relation between its two temporal modes, namely that each moment of time (each separate image) is a particle of eternity (the whole which comprises these various images). This sense of time involved here is very evident in *Circle*; one could even say it constitutes the basis of that film.
22. There are subperiods within these years, though we can conveniently ignore them.
23. The idea expressed here, that man and nature are animated by the same creative urges, is, of course, a commonplace of Romantic thought. Frye, in *A Study of English Romanticism* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 12, in fact, identifies this belief as part of the central kernel of the mythology of the Romantics. Chambers restates the idea elsewhere as when he says, "the primary process in each man is the art of his human nature which crafts him. Man as an artisan can communicate that in nature to other men because man and nature share the same instinct." *Art and Artists*, No. 7 (December, 1972), p. 29; italics mine.
24. Jack Chambers, "Perceptual Realism," *artscanada*, No. 22/23 (October, 1969), pp. 7-13.
25. This idea was expressed by the German Romantics at the very beginning of the Romantic movement. It can be found, for example, in Johann Gottfried Herder's *Von Erkennen and Empfinden der Menschlichen Seele*, 1778, and in Goethe's *Vom Deutscher Baukunst*, 1772 and *Uber Waheit und Wahrscheinlichkeit der Kunstwerke*, 1797. It is, I contend, the generative idea of Romanticism.
26. Elsewhere he writes: "Our consciousness of the material world is not ultimate reality, but rather attenuated features of Reality as it persists through into matter. At different points along that attenuation, appropriate materialisations are revealed. We see sunlight in trees, but perceive the Invisible Body projecting optical reality. When perception occurs, the impact unfolds the senses from around the creative centre, drawing them out and holding them open just as the forces of nature combine to open the bud, releasing to life the seeds of its continuing mystery. The mysterious in nature is acknowledged in that instant by the release of mystery at the centre of man. The mystery which energizes nature is perceived by the mystery which energizes man." "Perception, Painting and Cinema," *Art and Artists*, No. 7 (December, 1972), pp. 32-3.
27. Add to this list the following, not expressed in the passage just quoted but expressed elsewhere in Chambers' writings: the idea of synesthesia (v. Woodman, *Chambers*, The Coach House Press, p. 9), the idea that vision is of greater poetic value than rational analysis which is bound up with language. ("When we observe nature disinterestedly, inevitably the question arises: what is it? It's *called* a tree I know, but what is it?" Chambers asks. "Perception, Painting and Cinema," p. 29, italics mine.)
28. In Bradly, Beatty and Long, eds., *The American Tradition in Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Comp. Inc., 3rd ed., 1967), p. 575. The essay was first published, anonymously, in monograph form in 1836 and was reprinted, under the author's name, in 1849, in *Nature, Addresses and Lectures*.
29. Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in Bazin, *What is Cinema*, Vol. 1 (essays selected and translated by Hugh

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Gray, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1968), p. 12.

30. One infers this from the fact that the changes in the film's exposure are consonant with such changes in atmospheric conditions as the amount of cloud cover.
31. This looks like a strip of film printed onto photographic paper.
32. The cameraman, by the way, is shown looking down the focusing tube during the shooting, when there is no lens in the focusing position. One could, I suppose, construct interesting and elaborate explanations for this (based on the fact that he would not be seeing anything at all). I suspect it results only from an oversight or a lack of ready familiarity with the model of motion picture camera being used.
33. "Object matter" is my term for actual real world events or objects to which an artwork makes reference, considered separately from the techniques and structures used to describe them or from the associations such techniques and structures elicit. "Subject matter" is my term for the themes, events and objects suggested by the techniques and forms used. Subject matter, in this sense of the term, is something "in" the work of art, the *content*, suggested by its form, while object matter stands outside the work of art and is only inferred by it. Object matter, therefore, can never be the content of a work.
34. The passage begins in late summer or early fall and continues through autumn, winter, spring and summer and back again to the time of year at which the passage began.
35. It is, though, worth adding that like many Romantics, Chambers' use of artwork to explore epistemological questions is founded on the belief that artwork, because of its very nature, is capable of furnishing ontological and metaphysical revelations. Historically ontological and epistemological concerns were subsumed in the concept of *noesis*. It is this concept upon which much of this tradition is based: Chambers' work follows directly in this tradition.
36. Perhaps it was to point out the similarities between the character and structural function of a shot in this film and the character and structural function of a frame in "standard" films that Chambers sometimes incorporates freeze-frame — a device which literally transforms an individual frame into a shot — in this section.
37. Cited in José L. Barrio-Garay, "Jack Chambers' Paintings — The Last Decade" in Paddy O'Brien, ed., *Jack Chambers The Last Decade* (Catalogue, London Regional Art Gallery, 1980), p. 9.
38. It is, of course, true of any photographic image, though especially true of documentary images, that a photograph always implies a moment belonging to the past, the moment when it was taken. That this is so helps to explain both the attraction which Chambers felt to the cinema and his proclivity towards using imagery derived from photography in his paintings.
39. Regina Cornwall's *Snow Seen: The Films and Photography of Michael Snow* (Toronto: P.M.A. Books, 1980) is one example.
40. The British writers on avant-garde cinema have been the most consistent proponents of this view. LeGrice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1977) and most of the articles in Gidal, ed., *Structural Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1976) represent this point of view.

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