

Donald Skoller

Aspects of Cinematic Consciousness

"Suspense" and Presence / Dis-Illusion / Unified Perceptual Response

Even when we arrive at the conviction that free will is nothing but an illusion, we still find repugnant a conclusion, thence, that the *self* is a complexity; so greatly do we feel it a unity—so great is the *impression* of unity which we get from it. What prevents us from supposing that the instants of the sensation of being succeed each other, in us, as rapidly as the fragmentary images of the cinema, which in their succession produce the illusion of life?

REMY DE GOURMONT,
Dust for Sparrows

A preoccupation of the present moment in art in general, and in cinema particularly, is the question of illusionism. The positive values of illusionistic experience have been under reconsideration throughout the past decade. The question of illusionism is virtually as old as art itself, but it has asserted itself with special intensity in these recent decades. Whatever benefits seemed to have been derived from illusionism have apparently entered a phase of critically diminishing returns. This is signalled by the emergence of "anti-illusionism," "non-illusionism," and, say, "illusion-defeating" as techniques or approaches having a paradoxically positive ring to them in usage and application.

It is as if we have arrived at a moment not only in the history of art but in the history of culture, as well, in which the function of illusionism within the aesthetic experience has undergone a radical change. Those things that illusionism seemed to give art access to appear to have become secondary. Focus has shifted to the act of perception itself, as if the good servant were suddenly exposed as the villain (the butler did it), and as if ultimate truth depended upon understanding and revelation of the nature of the "culprit," Illusion. One peculiarity of the situation is a reluctance to place this development within the cultural context of the present, to relate it to the environment in which it is taking place. When one attempts to do this, one meets resistance,

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as if it were somehow wrong to find such a relationship.

I refer to this as a "peculiarity of the situation" rather than a "peculiarity of the moment" because this has long been an area of reticence. Writing in 1927, Kasimir Malevich was moved to make a similar observation with regard to painting. "Painting has hitherto been looked upon and treated by critics as something purely 'emotional,'" he wrote, "without consideration for the particular character of the environment in which this or that art work came into being; no analytic investigation has ever been undertaken which was able to explain what causes the development of an artistic structure, in its relation to the environment affecting it. The basic question, as to why a certain color system or construction was bound to develop within the 'body' of painting, as such, has never been treated."

Each of these issues comes home to roost with special pointedness in cinema, possibly because of the synthesizing quality of film, the comprehensiveness of its aural and visual elements, and the ways in which narrative, graphic and plastic dynamics combine in cinema to activate these problems to an almost orchestral extent. It is especially interesting to apply Malevich's question to one of the most vital movements in cinema today, what has been referred to most frequently as "the structural film." In an exploratory treatment of structural film, P. Adams Sitney referred to four characteristics: "a fixed camera position (fixed *frame* from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, loop printing (the immediate repetition of shots, exactly and without variation), and re-photography off of a screen." Sitney added that "very seldom will one find all four characteristics in a single film, and there are structural films which avoid these usual elements."

It is impossible to avoid noticing how each of these characteristics is anti-illusionist in tendency. These and the general emphasis upon the overall "shape" of the film piece produced, to the subordination of its "content," suggest that an essential impulse of the structural filmmaker is to *place emphasis upon elements immediate in a concrete way*



VERTIGO. James Stewart and Kim Novak.
photo: Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

to what is actually occurring on screen as a material phenomenon. This is so crucial to the nature of these films, and to the experience resulting from seeing them, as to suggest a radical alteration in the overriding quality and condition of consciousness that they evoke. It is also plain to see how each of these characteristics or techniques moves the image in the direction of becoming an object or event, right *there* on screen in the real time and space of the viewing situation, rather than an "image" representing or soliciting illusionistic transport to a facsimile *elsewhere*. Applying Malevich's question, we are led to ask why this has developed at this time within the body of cinema. Rather than being idle or gratuitous, the question places focus upon the deepening adventure of cinematic consciousness. It seems, at long last, to move us into confrontation with essential cinematic dynamics—the energies of film—beyond cinema's role as late-born child emulating older sibling arts, aping theatrical and literary modes at the expense of developing its own identity.

With this in mind, it is my intention to further explore questions implicit to the issues raised above. They involve matters of illusion, "presence," objecthood and allusiveness—issues that have not been sufficiently placed within the cinematic experience and the cultural moment in which they have emerged. I am most interested in the structural film and its relationship to the problems of illusionism. I am even more interested in just what environmental and cultural-historical impulses have led us toward the systematic reduction of illusion found in these films as exercises of consciousness. But I do not believe that these are new problems or questions. Rather, they are intrinsic to cinema in general; and coming to an understanding of their most recent forms is very much a process of noticing, in the elements composing an individual film, the evolutionary development of a certain line of films.

The original intention of this article was to present a study of the work of a young filmmaker, Morgan Fisher, with special reference to his film, PHI PHENOMENON. Along with "persistence of vision," the phi phenomenon is the basic illusionistic mechanism through which the "moving image" takes place. Fisher has created a piece in which the

confrontation with cinematic illusion occurs in the most distilled and discrete form I've yet to encounter. But his film is an exercise in compression, so couched in the modes and dynamics of emerging cinematic consciousness that it must be followed through its gradual emergence historically. That is why this exploration necessarily traces through a line of films more than casually involved with the process of illusion—and dis-illusion. This will be presented in two installments. The first, in this issue, traces the quest for "presence" and dis-illusion through works by Hitchcock, Resnais, and Michael Snow; the second installment, to be published in the March-April 1973 issue, will concentrate on the work of Morgan Fisher.

1 We shall no longer hold that perception is incipient science, but conversely that classical science is a form of perception which loses sight of its origins and believes itself complete. The first philosophical act would appear to be to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world, restore to things their concrete physiognomy, to organisms their individual ways of dealing with the world, and to subjectivity its inherence in history. Our task will be, moreover, to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system of 'Self-others-things' as it comes into being; to reawaken perception and foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact and as perception in the interest of the object which it presents to us and of the rational tradition to which it gives rise.

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY,
Phenomenology of Perception

For a long time I was intrigued by the idea of showing a triple feature consisting of VERTIGO, LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD, and WAVELENGTH. I wanted to call the bill "Three Masters of Suspense." The impulse was triggered by resemblances I'd noticed between MARIENBAD and VERTIGO, so that back then—this was close to half-a-dozen years ago—I played around with the notion that MARIENBAD represented, in part, an exercise in the cubistic transformation of the Hitchcock film. Certain content factors suggested this at first. In both VERTIGO and MARIENBAD, the male lead is occupied with convincing the female lead to accept and/or assume an identity he obsessively wishes her to have. Resnais provided the interior echo of Hitchcock graphically by plastering a life-size cardboard cut-out of Uncle Alfred *suspended*—feet off the ground—against an elevator shaft during the opening minutes of MARIENBAD. Hitchcock also "appears" in Resnais' MURIEL, again as a life-size two-dimensional cut-out figure, dressed as a chef outside a restaurant.

The desire to put these films together and see them and have others see them (I was teaching film at the time) was very strong but only vaguely understood. I told Michael Snow about it, hoping, through expected repudiation, to end my own obsession—especially since VERTIGO had been withdrawn from 16mm rental. But Snow liked the idea. Over a period

of time I traced the relationships between the films to a more definite core. Each of these films, in terms of the manipulation of consciousness to which the viewer is exposed, is an exercise in the reduction of an illusion. But each of the films engages us at a different plane of consciousness by organizing and then neutralizing the illusion through different modes of presentation.

In *VERTIGO* the director is preoccupied with the manipulation of an illusion at the narrative or story level of his film. His protagonist is made the foil of a murderous deception: Jimmy Stewart falls in love with Kim Novak after having been hired by an old friend of his to protect Miss Novak from her own suicidal impulses. The old friend represents Kim to be his wife. She's really his mistress and what he is planning to do is to kill his real wife. Stewart is necessary to the plot because of his acrophobia. The old friend accomplishes his murder scheme by pushing his real wife to her death from a church steeple after Novak has run to the top and then stepped aside. Stewart has freaked out at about the second story with his reliable vertigo.

Many months later, Stewart—a broken man from loss of the only woman he ever really loved—happens to see Novak walking down a street in San Francisco. She's a brunette and her appearance is sleazier than in her earlier, elegant incarnation. At first, Stewart hasn't the slightest notion that she is the woman he lost—the "suicide" was that convincing—but the girl he sees on the street turns him on so fiercely that he goes after her, establishes a relationship and then proceeds to persuade this "other" girl to transform her appearance into that of the lost woman. She changes her hair color and style and he buys her clothes like the ones the "original" had worn. (This is done with an incredible intensity and it is hard to argue against *VERTIGO* being Hitchcock's greatest film.) The finishing touch is provided by Novak herself when she unconsciously wears a piece of jewelry that she had kept as a souvenir of her earlier escapade. When Stewart sees it, he knows what's been going on.

Although they collaborated closely and with extraordinary harmony, Resnais and Robbe-Grillet agree that the only interpretive element that they share in analyzing the film they made is that it is about a "persuasion." And, indeed, though meanings and "aboutnesses" keep bubbling up from *LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD*, what the screen shows is an extensive exercise in which the male protagonist, "X," tries to persuade the heroine, "A," that they had met a year earlier, fallen in love, but agreed to a year's wait before making a full commitment to one another and rearranging their lives and the lives of those with whom they have been involved. It is impossible within the space limits of this article to begin to discuss the implications and effects that spin off the basic situation created by Robbe-Grillet and Resnais—especially in terms of how or in what ways there are further grounds for somehow bringing *MARIENBAD* and *VERTIGO* into reflective proximity to one another. Seeing them and thinking about them together, I get the strong sense of Resnais



LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD.
Uncle Alfred by the elevator. photo: Audio Brandon.

having split the atom of the Hitchcockian world, of *MARIENBAD* being some wild but affinite nuclear fission of *VERTIGO*. The deliberate energies of *VERTIGO* (Hitchcock's "slowest" thriller) explode and cascade throughout *MARIENBAD* with barrelhouse barococo reverberations.

One thing should be said, however: regardless of the confusion and deception worked upon the hero of *VERTIGO*, the audience is never for a moment deprived of a solid narrative "banister" to hold onto throughout the film. It is interesting to hear Hitchcock's own words on this decision, the decision to change the plot of the Boileau-Narcejac novel which the film otherwise follows closely. In the novel, the reader doesn't learn that the second "look-alike" girl is the same girl as the "suicide" until the very end. Hitchcock, in the Truffaut interview, says:

"In the screenplay we used a different approach. At the beginning of the second part, when Stewart meets the brunette, the truth about Judy's identity is disclosed, but *only* to the viewer. Though Stewart isn't aware of it yet, the viewers already know that Judy just isn't a girl who looks like Madeleine, but that she *is* Madeleine! Everyone around me was against this change; they all felt that the revelation should be saved for the end of the picture. I put myself in the place of a child whose mother is telling him a story. When there's a pause in her narration, the child always says, 'What comes next, Mommy?' Well, I felt that the second part of the novel was written as if nothing came next, whereas in my formula, the little boy, *knowing* that Madeleine and Judy are the same person, would then ask, 'And Stewart doesn't know it, does he? What will he do when he finds out about it?'"

What I wish to point out about Hitchcock's statement is the way in which it provides the viewer, and the degree to which it accommodates the viewer, with a conceptual grasp of phenomena happening on screen. Hitchcock sees it as a way of generating yet another suspense element: "What will he do when he finds out about it?" But in an even more telling manner it organizes the cohesiveness of his screen material into much more highly defined *relational* lines. The viewer is given an omniscience that puts handles around the entire plot configuration,

conceptual handles which unavoidably subordinate all screen phenomena to the storyline unravelling. In *MARIENBAD*, there is a deliberate and rigorously executed usurpation of story dynamics to which the audience has been accustomed by long exposure and habituation to the conventional plot's cause-and-effect relational patterns. Hitchcock is making his film for an audience he knows very well, and he does everything he can to give that audience what it needs and expects in order to enjoy what he is going to show them. Resnais and Robbe-Grillet know that audience well, too, and they seem to strive to effect an almost alogical overload that will drive the viewers into a graphic-perceptual mode of looking at their film. They undermine conventional relationality patterns and liberate graphic energies bound up in expected conceptual packages by exploding the usual syntax of logically unfolding images on a screen within a story frame.

In terms of our earlier reference to these films as "suspense" films—as exercises in the reduction of an illusion—the locus of consciousness moves through a predominately narrative realm in Hitchcock's film, with the director doing everything he can to maintain the audience's distance from losing its bearings and being confronted by an unidentifiable graphic object; everything on screen can be named and placed within a logical framework. In the Resnais film, the locus of consciousness moves through continually unexpected juxtaposings and transformations of graphic materials that resist, rather tenaciously, surrendering individual integrities on the level of the shot and the scene—occasionally the sequence—to the overall abstraction of the story configuration. But earlier we spoke of "Three Masters of Suspense." True. And in *WAVELENGTH* the resistance to relational subordination is even stronger.

2 "... I've been trying to give some attention to how 'one thing leads to another' or more accurately: 'the ways in which one action leads to another,' " Michael Snow has written and then immediately gone on to say, "That isn't much clearer."

Snow's concern about "how one thing leads to another" and his qualification of "thing" into "action" is something that would very naturally be on the mind of the maker of *WAVELENGTH*. (To say nothing of \longleftrightarrow [BACK AND FORTH] and *LA REGION CENTRAL*.) He goes on to say: "Apparently certain types of events and in myself certain states of mind bring about attention with this kind of emphasis. My perception of the nature of a situation (result of a vague yearning to codify 'how one thing leads to another') if clear, includes everything. Ha ha." Snow, unlike Hitchcock, does not deal in omniscience—or, rather, the illusion of omniscience as generated through that network of cause and effect concepts that we call "narrative."

Certainly this is the case at the *WAVELENGTH* stage of his work. It is worth noting that Snow's films, especially *ONE SECOND IN MONTREAL*, \longleftrightarrow , and *LA REGION CENTRAL* all work to show the limitations of the eye's field and capacity in encompassing expe-

rience and phenomena. And I am tempted to point out further that in *LA REGION CENTRAL*—which expands \longleftrightarrow as an action into "All Around"—Snow provides our consciousness with an exercise in graphic omniscience after which the normal, unaided receptions of the eye are forever put in their very un-omniscient place. It is also worth noting that Snow isn't limiting his comments to "matters artistic" in the conventional sense of the term—how one brush stroke leads to another, or one frame or scene to a next. He is pondering general questions of perception and meaning. But it is also strongly part of the overall sense of his writing that there is a "back-and-forth" relationship between art and reality, almost as if he were pursuing a Coleridgean probe into the nature of consciousness itself.

It is important to follow Snow's developing "skepticism" in the piece quoted earlier. "I just don't know enough to truly experience," he cries out at one point. "I'm not scientific. No 'ends', no 'goals', no use. This vague yearning to codify is being reacted to only in the action of noticing 'how one thing leads to another', I do not *have* a system, I *am* a system. There won't be any summing up. Perhaps there will. These observations are in my life with my work." And then he makes a distinction between the media in which he mostly works and literature: "In literature 'one thing leads to another', yes, but what we are discussing is noticing how 'many events lead to many others'." In making this distinction with regard to literature, Snow seems to be seeking to relieve the non-literary of this function. After all, a good story is totally concerned with this business of how "one thing leads to another." Beginning, middle, end—in that order! *Once upon a time* . . .

Let's follow Snow's musing further: "Experience of an event can only be anticipatory, actual, and post facto. Or prophetic, intentional, guessed, planned or total or historic, reminiscent, analytical." (The formal scenario for *MARIENBAD*!) Now Snow has put literary/relational values in the place he feels they must have as he continues his exploration. And as he continues he finally breaks into the clearing where, it certainly would seem, his own work begins:

"Behind this attempt at orderly noticing do I have a horror of the possibility of chaos? Would chaos be an inability to tell one thing from another? Is sanity only the ability to identify and to name? Cultural? Is ordering the 'disorder' an order? Can there be order without repetition? Is there something necessarily fatalistic but also 'religious' in affirming (quoting?) that disorder must be only a type of order the nature of which is not yet comprehended . . .? But the eye of the 'beholder' . . . not only is order projected but all is order; all is ordained? The reason for the shape of my nose the same as the reason a bus just passed this building . . . Oh, that's going too far.

"Events take time. Events take place.

"Named, scheduled events: bus ride, concert, Christmas, eclipse, etc. This is not what I'm interested in. Sub-events: not 'what is', not 'what is not', but what happens in between. In this case: 'not'."

These are the ponderings of a leading structural filmmaker. How he seeks after the keys to his own *dis-illusionment*—a way out of the entrapment of cultural premises that force their wavelengths of ordering upon a consciousness weary of the resulting deceptions. To free phenomena from these established matrices, to spring object and action loose from systems and events enveloping them.

“ ‘Passages’ then, wherein or post facto or in anticipation, I may note revelatory unities and disparities. What’s interesting is not codifying but experiencing and understanding the nature of passages from one state to another without acknowledging ‘beginning’ as having any more importance in the incident than ‘importance’ has in this sentence.

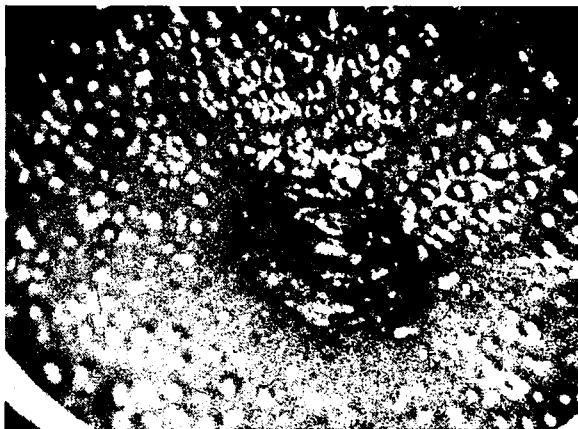
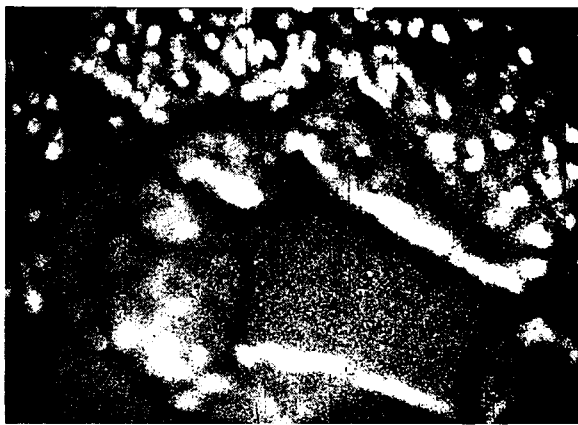
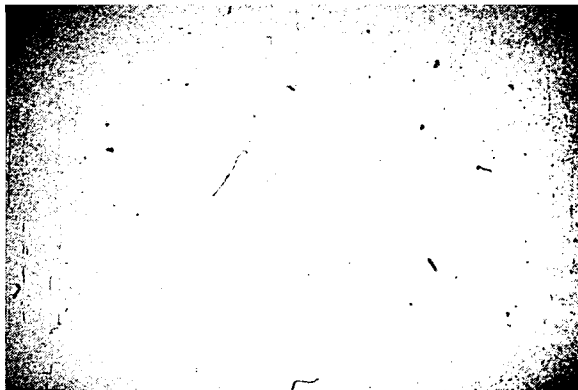
“Or than ‘ending’ in this . . .”

3 What happens when “one thing leads to another”? How does one thing lead to another? Does one thing lead to another? These questions are raised by Snow, but he resolves them only in terms of his own policy, his own adopted attitude toward liberating himself from the centrifuge of proliferating experiences. I think, here, it would be of considerable value to *follow* the course of an event or action, of one thing leading to another.

Visualize, for the moment, an extreme close-up of a potful of tomato soup. In fact, wondering about this I shot a short *étude* film with this problem as scenario. So there’s no need to speculate how it might look or what a viewer might experience. What I’ll report are my responses and observations along with the responses and observations of others who have seen it.

I emptied the contents of a can of Campbell’s tomato soup (metawarhol?) into a pot, added the water and heated it just this side of boiling. Then the soup was allowed to cool to the point of no longer sending up visible vapor. A 16mm Beaulieu with zoom lens was placed on a tripod above the stove. Lens was focused on the surface of the soup and zoomed in so that the visual field consisted of nothing but the redness of the soup. Sides of the pot were not in the field. Lighting was flat and camera angle was as flat as low ceiling would allow, at about an 85-degree angle to the surface of the soup. Camera and stove were turned on at just about the same time. Then, the zoom lens was gradually pulled back—not continually but in stops and goes of varying length—through three rather distinct zones of spatial relationship to the soup. This took place over a period of 2 minutes and 47 seconds, the running time of 100 feet of 16mm film at 24 frames-per-second.

The zoom was held, at first, on the surface of the soup until heat began to produce motion and first bubbling. The field was slightly increased by slight pullback of the zoom but still not taking in even the sides of the pot. The boiling progressed until the surface of the soup began to swirl, break, and rush in upon itself. At this point the zoom pulled back further to reveal the sides of the pot and then, gradually, the whole pot on the stove with the



simmering soup (flame had been reduced, off camera). This was held for about twenty seconds, the visual field consisting of soup, pot, and the one burner area of a four-burner stove.

Then a man enters the frame—shoulders, back, arms and hands in view—and he proceeds to ladle the soup into a bowl. The zoom has progressed upward to its furthest point, which is about a medium shot of the stove and the portion of the man described above. It holds from this point until the end of the film, and during the remaining moments the man finishes ladling the soup and then, from a small but sinister-looking bottle, pours some black substance into the bowl, mixes it in and walks out of frame leaving the pot and stove alone in the field until the film runs out.

When this is projected on screen, the first perception is of a red field. The red field is held for a full half-minute before there is any suggestion that it has even the potential for motion. Viewers have regularly referred to a “glowering” quality that the red rectangle on-screen takes on. They have also regularly commented on the intensity of this first part of the film. When the first bubble produces a highlight in a corner of the field, there is a slight break in this intensity; and when the caloric/kinetic action sets in and the red reveals itself as a liquid, there is regularly a lightening of mood in the room and a certain sense of surprise and delight in the discovery. When the zoom up begins to reveal the sides of the pot, there is a radical change in the kind of consciousness filling the screening room. The slight lightening of mood becomes almost gaiety, and there is usually chuckling and “the shock of recognition” more along the lines of the viewer having experienced a quick cut that has juxtaposed two disparate images that set each other off in some unique way. But there hasn’t been a cut at all and the viewer knows this and it tones his response. When the man enters, everyone seems to settle back to see what’s going to happen next—how this one thing, now that they are back in the world of “things,” is going to lead to another. And, if anything, the mood lightens further as the “protagonist” does his thing with soup, ladle, bowl and small sinister bottle.

Although this film *étude* was made before reading Snow’s “Passage” piece (though not before having seen his *WAVELENGTH* and \leftrightarrow), it is interesting to apply some of the questions raised in “Passage” to the soup *étude*. And the film is an *étude* fully—in the sense of being “a composition built upon a single technical motive but played for its artistic value”—because the “feel” of the experience is a dimension of its meaning that can only be alluded to by these words.

Snow seems to reflect on this as part of the attitude that one might best bring to participating in exercises in perception such as the ones we have been referring to: “What’s interesting is not codifying but experiencing and understanding the nature of passages from one state to another.” The soup *étude* grew out of a developing sense and belief that a given object could exist and necessarily did

exist in three rather distinct states of relationship to the consciousness of the perceiver, as received through the unaided eye.

It might be of value to add, here, that “unaided eye” is consistent with the relative non-manipulation of the visual field in the soup film. There is no distortion or manipulation of real surfaces, no essential capabilities added to supplement ocular deficiency, as an x-ray might do, or montage that created a filmic continuum on screen that overcame certain time/space factors that impinge upon the eye’s grasp of phenomena geographically or temporally out of its normal range. True, even in the soup film certain “aids” are given to the eye: the limiting frame, flatness, the zoom lens’ capacity to close in on the surface of a hot object and to graduate its degrees of motion toward and away from the objects. But this seems more a matter of “mediation” than of “manipulation” and, I strongly believe, promotes a totally different tone and tense of consciousness in the viewer.

4 In general film viewing over a period of time, I had begun to notice three distinctly different states of consciousness—and even sensations of being—evoked by three different modes of presenting an object. First, an object within the context of a movie, a movie seen at a commercial theatre (even at an art house), occurs in relationship with many other objects that come and go as part of the story being told. To the degree that these objects are “carried away” with the momentum of the unfolding story, they lose a certain perceptual integrity or impact of their own. (Perhaps it is more accurate to say that they establish a movement of consciousness that expends itself on *horizontality across surfaces*. More on this later.)

In densely plotted or narrativized films, this momentum is usually built to such a pitch that even fairly regular close-ups of individual objects, isolated from the other details of the unfolding situation, fail to break the momentum, to redirect the locus of consciousness from “across” to “into.” Furthermore, during the general course of such films all of the details and objects have been so stickily pressed into a conceptual wad that they cannot pull away from this cerebral (though shallow) implantation readily enough to become *percepts*, even when they are closed in upon. The energy generated in this mode of presentation is highly conceptual. The whole pitch of the field in which these objects appear is in the direction of their relationship to one another. Even an exertion of will toward fully grasping or sensing qualities of individual objects cannot quite overcome implicit matrices of overriding interactions and conceptual linkages of meaning. And when such fields occur within the overriding matrix of “a story,” the dilution of objecthood is geometrically increased.

When an object stands alone—or when, though to a lesser degree, groups of objects occur within a field around which the conceptual premise has been thinned or somehow suspended—the tendency toward perceiving, rather than conceiving, is

increased. This accounts for the heightening of object "presence" in certain suspense films and also certain "B" flicks of the Monogram strain, in which the conceptual elements may be described as transcendently ludicrous. This is not to propose a kind of aesthetic nihilism in which any attempt at creating balances between "story" and objecthood is seen as a subversion of the perceptual by the conceptual. But it takes a Dreyer or a Bresson to strike just such a balance, wherein matrix and matter reflect and inflect to mutual advantage.

Subjectively, "presence" can almost be seen as a concentration or accrual of perceptual energies focused on an object or event. The tendencies toward and opportunities for verbalization increase between graphic and narrative planes of consciousness; one can follow this experientially in the soup *étude*. But first it is necessary to introduce a third plane of perception: the plastic—not in the sculptural sense but in the sense of "generative forces in nature," its much earlier etymological meaning. In the soup film the journey is from the plastic (pure red on the screen) to the graphic (the emerging recognizability of liquid into soup-in-pot) evolving finally into man doing something to the soup with sinister foreshadowing. It is with the last that the threshold into the narrative is crossed.

But it is useful to notice how the possibilities and inclinations toward verbalization increase and how the concentration of perceptual energy and consciousness itself diffuses. In the pure-red state there is little more that can be grasped, much less "said." The sense of the ominous seems to relate to just that verbal helplessness, as though we were rendered deaf and mute simply by watching. "Relief" comes with the first recognizable event—a highlight on the red field's surface that next becomes a bubble, opening up the whole realm of "the liquid." The first appearance of that bubble adds enormously to the literary potentialities of the "image" on screen: *light, motion, bubble, liquid*, whole conceptual constellations, primitive but "rich" in comparison to what it has just succeeded.

With the appearance of the rim of the pot, as the zoom continues to draw back, and then—startlingly discreet—the hold on the full picture of the pot and soup boiling, a radical change occurs in the consciousness of the viewer. He is suddenly in the presence of a representation of an object: what had been red and just red a moment before is now the picture of an object tacitly (but with unavoidable insistence) asking to be accepted as really there. Here the metaphor of consciousness as a "stream" becomes especially apt and together with the idea of "degrees" or "indices" of illusion begins to suggest the nature of the energy processes involved in this exercise of perception. I wish, at this point, to bring two other concepts face to face—one old, the other rather new: the "willing suspension of disbelief" on the one hand, and "presence" on the other. I submit that the experience of "presence" depends upon the unification of the energies of consciousness that takes place through perception of an object or event tending

to move and organize consciousness toward its most concentrated state. I submit that this "effect" is dependent upon a number of elements or conditions. I believe they are myriad, variable in an almost infinite way, and that in any given instance the degree of "presence" can alter—be increased or decreased—in any number of ways.

But let's consider two specifics of the soup *étude*: if one tries to grasp the progressive loss of "presence" that occurs between the plastic, graphic and narrative phases of presentation, they seem strongly traceable to diffusion "opportunities" that arise as verbalization becomes more accessible. At first, we encounter a quality that resists nameability in any other way than a single, rather inviolable: red. Then a simple, recognizable object/event, involved with nothing but itself: the pot of soup. Finally: involvement in an action that suggests further action and consequences beyond itself or any of its components. The "red"—before any suggestion has occurred that it is anything but just "red"—makes no allusions to anything (but itself). We cannot or should not tend to ask of it: what is it for? what will be done with it? When it becomes a liquid, the questions start. When it becomes a pot on a stove, the questioning may even tend to abate but its nameability increases. This nameability diffuses the unification of consciousness, the concentration of perceptual energies accumulating with regard to the original *red field*.

5 We got onto this by following through on a line of thought and questioning very much on the mind of the film artist who made *WAVELENGTH*, Michael Snow: "How does one thing lead to another?" We came to Snow through Hitchcock and Resnais and an unpardonable impulse to see a triple feature consisting of *VERTIGO*, *MARIENBAD* and *WAVELENGTH*. We came to that right after reflecting briefly on the relationship between the current structural film movement and the ongoing revaluations of the question of illusionism. The intense reconsideration of illusory aesthetic experience that has been taking place during the past decade with such central relationship to all art has revolved around other matters like "presence," "objecthood," "flatness." Is there some essential issue or human concern to be found at the heart of all of these matters? Can they not all be seen as an effort at the re-concentration or redirection of human consciousness toward a mode of most intense engagement in a material here and now?

It is a reconditioning of the modes of consciousness along a broad front that has been taking place. This in itself is not news. But the specific elements of this reconditioning seem to elude any coherent general response. How delighted we once were to learn that our participation in the theatrical event called for a willing suspension of disbelief! Isn't the central realization of all anti-illusionistic impulse that willing suspension of disbelief unavoidably anaesthetizes consciousness? And that so many willing suspensions of disbelief have accumulated over the centuries that we now find ourselves

living in truly unbelievable circumstances and required to accept them willingly? It is either his moral sense or his visceral overload that makes the contemporary artist allergic to the illusionistic in any medium.

These words are loaded with the history, the etymology of human misery: in Middle English, descended from the Latin, "illusion" meant "mocked, ridiculed." Some dictionaries claim that "the study of the nature of sensation" is an *archaic* definition of "aesthetic." Is this so? Only, perhaps, in an age of *anaesthesia*. Perhaps the artist has sensed his task to be *reaesthesia*, his task and filial atonement for the illusions of the past. His specific problem and paradox seems to be the reunification of a badly diffused and diluted consciousness at a moment when a non-linear gestalt seems to be the evolutionary direction he should be riding herd toward. The resolution of this paradox is not the issue at hand in this article. A more immediate task is exposure of the modes of diffusion and dilution. The three dynamics—narrative, graphic and plastic—exist in hierarchical relationship to one another. The narrative, as managed in the conventional story film, contains the broadest inclinations toward both diffusion and dilution of consciousness within the aesthetic experience. A radical division of consciousness occurs when there is a willing suspension of disbelief, when energies are deliberately, habitually, or autonomically made to divide into zones of acceptance.

Of the films referred to so far, *VERTIGO* precipitates the widest range of illusionistic transport in terms of the actual situation in which the viewer encounters it: seated in a darkened room, looking at the movie screen. Everything on screen represents itself as *real*. Even when an object or simple event occurs, every effort of the production and its director is to maintain the cooperation of the viewer in accepting it as real. The plastic imagination of the viewer—his very consciousness—is kept in continual motion across an unpausing sequence of events. Under the momentum of the narrative dynamic, consciousness is moved tropistically across an unremitting surface of graphic action firmly gripped by the story's premises. When the action slows down, the possibilities of tropistic redirection to the penetrative mode natural to the more static graphic dynamic—middleground within the triadic hierarchy—is overwhelmed by the *trompe l'oeil* ambience of the film's overriding representationality.

None of this is meant to berate Hitchcock, or *VERTIGO* as an artistic or entertainment achievement. What is at issue, in an absolute sense, is the manipulation and conditioning of consciousness engaged by such experience or quasi-experience. (It is interesting that Coleridge, who originated the notion of willing suspension, also advanced the belief that thought and consciousness were *corporeal*.) Here indeed both medium *and* mode are the massage, a radical conditioning of basic perceptual sets occurring through the most seemingly innocuous events. In this sense, the Hitchcock film archetypally demonstrates the longstanding, continual condi-

tioning of consciousness that the entertainment public is subjected to through exposure to the popular arts. Admittedly, Hitchcock is a master of the form and not intent upon subverting the sensibilities of his audience. His traditional brief personal appearance in each film he directs places perspective on this, but generically he is firmly entrenched in the narrative mode, and its dynamic—its manipulation of the energies of consciousness—predominates throughout each of his films.

When we move from *VERTIGO* to *MARIENBAD* (and then on to *WAVELENGTH*), this becomes clearer still.

6 Our interest here is not in solving "the riddle" of *MARIENBAD*. Rather, we are interested in taking soundings of the index of illusion that this film represents as a perceptual experience, the manipulation and conditioning of the viewer's consciousness. But in an important way, the question of a riddle—what *MARIENBAD* is all about—is relevant to our concern. If one were able to "reorganize" the graphic phenomena Resnais and Robbe-Grillet have provided into more familiar montage syntax, if one were able to restore dominance to the usurped narrative dynamic, then *MARIENBAD* could be put in its place as a kind of jig-sawed cinematic puzzle solved. But this doesn't happen that readily. Years of "puzzling through" lead the investigator in circles; finally, he just doesn't want to dope it out neatly, even if he could.

And I don't think he can. For instance: a lot depends on the final sequence, the departure from the mansion by "X" and "A." But by this time it is virtually impossible to determine the relationality of the action to what has apparently led up to it. The more one tries to fix it, the stronger the *gestural* values of the action assert themselves into a trope of absolute *going-away*. And the final image of the exterior of the mansion repeats a scene viewed earlier in the film more than once, maintaining the temporal ambiguity of the film's "ending." It is quite startling to notice how this all coincides with Michael Snow's ruminations in "Passage": "how one thing leads to another . . . What's interesting is not codifying but experiencing and understanding the nature of passage from one state to another without acknowledging 'beginning' as having any more importance in the incident than 'importance' has in this sentence . . . or than 'ending' in this . . ."

What is of greater interest and more immediate concern is that *MARIENBAD* does tend to tease the viewer's consciousness into speculating about its possible meaning. It suggests this game, it presents a "game" kind of mode; within itself, even as a closed system, it is continually *allusive*. What it forgoes of illusion it takes back by allusion. For purposes of achieving "presence" both illusion and allusion (rooted in the Latin *ludere*, to play) are debilitating. To be "rich with allusion" is a proper literary value and theatrical value in a theatre of words. Literary allusiveness works through synaesthesia, conjuring perceptual tendencies from conceptual moorings, spinning off sensory echoes amid silent abstraction. (Proliferating paradoxes!)

But in terms of an image, trafficking in illusion or allusion will necessarily weaken the beam or "column" of massing perceptual energies. And where the society's conditioning has produced the tendency toward diffusion to the extent that it is to be found in the industrio-corporate cultural dynamic, a primary motive of *aesthesia* must necessarily be almost ritual reconcentration, centripetal actions of consciousness, before this very function itself falls into atrophy from disuse.

In terms of such an exercise, *MARIENBAD* is then seen as middleground, transitional between the dominant narrative ambience, as exemplified here by *VERTIGO*, and the verging toward plasticity found in *WAVELENGTH*. For all of its undermining of narrative coherency and linear logicity, *MARIENBAD* is still pinned to graphic representationalism. It works to neutralize this with generous amounts of parody and self-parody through both audio and visual components of the cinema: the posturings, the heavy music, the equally heavy narrating voice, and touches like the cardboard Hitchcock—all of which make it a funkier movie than most viewers are willing to let it be. But with the exception of a handful of moments, the subversion of illusion occurs in the narrative and graphic modalities of the film's presentation. It achieves greater "presence," shot for shot, than one finds in Hitchcock's film. The story dynamic is not as intact in *MARIENBAD*. There is a pseudo-narrative momentum generated (something that Hollis Frampton works with more directly in his *PALINDROME*) but, since it is virtually devoid of the usual satisfactions of cause-and-effect resolution, it operates inversely and sets up psychic resistance to the normally ingratiating function of story-flow. In the face of confusion, it dreams of impedance: "stop the film, I want to figure out what's been happening" as opposed to "keep going, I want to find out how it's all gonna end!"

To this extent, *MARIENBAD* does not partake of the ritual annihilation of the present that we so fondly call "story." Once a story takes hold it is just that: an innocent little ceremony in which everything that happens is—at the moment that it happens—a unit standing between a reservoir of past information and the promise of further information to come. On screen an image in a story relates to the images that preceded it and to those that follow. The "better" the story, the less discrete as a unitary percept the image tends to be. The annihilation of the present (and the "presence" of the present) deprives cinema of one of its strongest properties. The graphic dynamic is a legitimate cinematic dynamic when it is not vitiated by any gratuitous illusionistic device. The determination of boundaries between what is gratuitous and what is essential here is virtually identical to asking "what is cinema?"

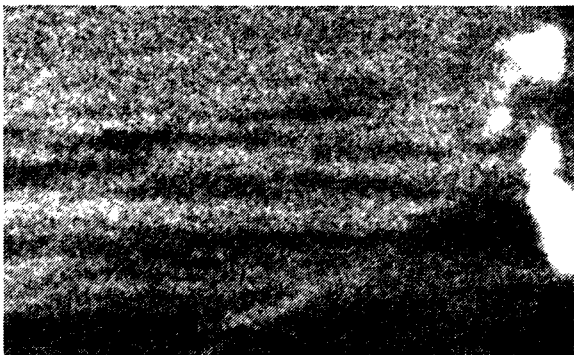
In legitimate cinematic graphicism, the image is not subordinate to a concept rushing through and past it. This is not necessarily a function of the duration of an image on the screen either, although duration tends to play an important part. A flash frame, undiluted by other illusionistic elements can have greater presence than a freeze frame moored

in an illusionistic context. Both techniques (flash and freeze), occurring in otherwise conventional story films, regularly surprise us with the strength of their effect. The flash frame seems to "short circuit" the narrative line, refreshing consciousness itself with a reverberative change of dynamic. And the freeze frame suddenly allows a 90-degree change of direction of consciousness from "across-and-following" to "in-and-immersing." Warhol seems incredibly right in some of the earlier films which concern themselves with graphic elements within a relatively static situation undergoing gradual change (*SLEEP*, *EMPIRE* and, easiest to take, *EAT*). But, as we shall see later, it is possible to suggest that films like Warhol's, while not ahead of *their* time or their *maker's* time, are ahead of *film's* time in terms of the education of literary and theatrical consciousness into cinematic consciousness.

7 If comparison of *VERTIGO* and *MARIENBAD* sets off in relief the disruptions of illusion that occur in the Resnais movie—logical storyline resisting conceptual absorption, and erosion of the graphic surface by image transformations inconsistent with real experiences of the unaided eye—comparison between *MARIENBAD* and *WAVELENGTH* takes us even more deeply into the nature of the cinematic process and the questions of "presence," illusionism, and suspense.

If we go back to our conceit of "masters of suspense" for a moment and look at *MARIENBAD* that way, the first thing noticed is how Resnais and Robbe-Grillet deprive us of the normal coherencies of the genre. *MARIENBAD* is not only something of a suspense film, it is a suspense film *in suspension* (which, incidentally, is precisely the image of Hitchcock that appears in the film: feet off the ground in mid-air against an elevator shaft—saturation!) Fragmented as it is, actions that ordinarily fall into a pattern of mystery and discovery in the typical thriller never are resolved and remain adrift in our consciousness as gestural rather than plot or even character elements. And yet, as noted earlier, there is the persistent sense of all of this belonging to something familiar, a kind of movie we have seen before, a generic *deja vu*. Not so in *WAVELENGTH*.

WAVELENGTH's strong affinity with the suspense film lies in its concern with the reduction of an illusion, the elimination of false impressions. In the conventional suspense film—epitomized by Hitchcock—this takes place predominantly at the narrative level of the film's life. This is not to suggest that these conventional films do not operate on graphic or plastic levels as well. But the heaviest burdens of "working things out" occur in the story premise, the plot unfolding, and, though usually to a much lesser degree, the presentation and revelation of character. These plot and character components, as they are conceived and executed for the screen, are carry-overs from time-tested theatrical and literary modes of development and representation. Hitchcock's films from the very earliest have always been ceremonies of the deception of appearances: a music hall memory wizard who is



really the instrument of a monumental espionage coup; a windmill that isn't a windmill at all (only the hero notices that its blades are turning the wrong way!); the cymbal crash that will hide a gunshot in the concert hall; the docile young man who runs a motel and lives with the taxidermized remains of his mother. All of these provide opportunity for startlingly graphic moments; but they are moments firmly implanted in the moving narrative line of the film, and they are rendered through traditional representational methods of the smoothest kind.

MARIENBAD disrupts both narrative and graphic homogeneities, erodes these surfaces, and so authoritatively gives the resulting gestural elements a life of their own that the very idea of more logical alternatives—that there is a definite answer to questions raised—becomes irrelevant to the experience provided by the film. This is the kind of false impression that MARIENBAD works to eliminate, the illusion it reduces, and, as such, MARIENBAD does indeed occupy middleground between the conventional suspense film and WAVELENGTH.

WAVELENGTH is concerned with *the false impressions of the screen image itself*. Preoccupations with narrative, graphic and plastic dynamics are reversed. Whereas the conventional suspense film is dominated by concerns generated by the story it tells and works graphically only to support and enhance its tale (and plastically hardly at all), WAVELENGTH reduces this element to a fleeting episode—the death of an intruder—that occurs almost in the manner of a parodistic *hommage* to the thriller. I will only outline the film here, drawing from Snow's own description: A gradual zoom over a period of 45 minutes from one end of an 80-foot loft to the bank of windows looking out on the street at the furthest side of this loft. Passing through the space of the loft, leaving objects and four abrupt and concise human events behind it, coming to the panel between the windows at the farthest end and moving directly into a still shot of the sea tacked to that wall below two other "still" graphic hangings tacked on the same panel.

The grand deception that Snow reduces in WAVELENGTH is one of cinema's historical givens, one of its near absolutes: illusionistic depth of field. In \longleftrightarrow Snow uses the mounted camera as a kinetic pump through which mass is converted into energy in an exercise almost literally demonstrating the Eisteinian formula, $E = mc^2$; but in WAVELENGTH Snow uses camera and lens to siphon illusionistic depth from his space. While many things happen in WAVELENGTH, they are secondary and tertiary "subplots" to the main action. It is true that Snow works assiduously to erode the graphic surface of his film in a number of ways. Color filters in front of the lens selectively and obviously fragment the apparently homogeneous light into its many individual chromatic wavelengths. Consciousness is spared the effort of willing suspension of disbelief in the objective "reality" of the film's "content" through this device in itself. And since it is a color film, whose graphic reality is totally dependent upon the relationship of these spectral elements to the two di-

mensional surface of the frame and screen themselves, it is a subversion of the illusionistic base of the film at a most essential level. The dimension of "real time" is also disrupted occasionally by superimposition of chrono-alogicalities playing against the linear trajectory of the zoom. (One should note that this is one of *MARIENBAD*'s most concerted efforts and that, regressively, it occurs in Hitchcock as a clearly indicated flashback. In *MARIENBAD*, of course, it operates as part of the programmatic *subjective naturalism* that is the basic motif of the film as it mixes time present with time past and future and also speculative time from multi-personaged points of view.)

8 The most profound occurrence in *WAVELENGTH* is the reduction of illusionistic depth of field. It goes beyond the narrative and graphic dynamics with which the viewer has some familiarity through literary and theatrical experiences. Even Snow's deliberately self-conscious manipulations of color and his time-space displacements are not totally unfamiliar. But something else is, and in an uncannily elusive way. As the zoom lens increases its focal length and compresses and flattens the field as viewed on the screen, an entirely different event is taking place, a "dramatically" different realm is entered. It is filled with ironies accessible only through *visceral discernment*. As the zoom slowly progresses, it reduces the degree of illusionistic depth of field presented to the viewer.

It is not just the "reduction of the frame" and its contents, as Annette Michelson has suggested in an essay on Snow in *Artforum*. This would account for the quantitative elimination of objects and events occurring during the earlier, shorter-focal length phases of *WAVELENGTH*, when the full depth of the loft's space is illusionistically represented and the suggestion of some implicit narrative is at its strongest. But at a more essential level of the experience there is a liberation of illusioned energy, a release from willing suspension of perceptual disbelief occurring to the viewer's consciousness as depth-illusion itself is reduced. It should be recalled that *WAVELENGTH* begins with a shot of the loft from deepest illusionistic perspective and ends with the frame filled with a close-up of a two-dimensional photograph (its final irony being the assimilation of the photo into yet another illusioned depth of space). This is the central tension of *WAVELENGTH*, the condition from which it draws its uncanny tautness, an almost erective pride of consciousness freed from dutiful perceptual duplicity.

It is a tension beyond words, a total visceral response not beyond discernment. The refreshment and invigoration that many viewers feel after seeing *WAVELENGTH* results from the resociation of sensibility that follows the gradual deactivation of the "willing-suspension" mechanism. And there is something else that gives *WAVELENGTH* the quality of true tragedy of an Aristotelian sort but translated into plastic elements or terminology. I have felt it each time I've viewed this film. The zoom closes in on the wall and the three hangings. Centered on

the wall below the other two "pictures" is the still shot of the sea-waves (I believe this is a blow-up from a single frame seen in another film by Snow). Above this still, to the left and flush with the molding of the panel, is a shot of the white-on-black silhouette of "The Walking Woman," Snow's earlier icon of flatness in a world of three-dimensional depth. This is tacked to the wall; and *tacked onto it* is another white on black silhouette of the same Walking Woman, but larger than the basic one to which it is tacked. It is a perfect device for creating the illusion of two Walking Women, one much closer than the other, though of course they are no more distant than the thickness of the sheet of paper involved. Yet Snow deliberately separates them with a thin white border, calling attention to the mechanism of the depth-generating illusion. This, of course, is his articulation, graphically, of the basic truth of the zoom lens' generation of depth-illusion: the zoom lens does not create any spatial depth that does not exist; it renders the *impression* of depth through divergencies of object size and planar distortion. Finally, without extending the description as far as its interest might take us, I should add that the third picture on the wall is a front-and-back composite of what looks to be a photograph of a nude girl in the street. The photo contains much illusionistic perspective and sets off in relief the flat, cut-out silhouette of the Walking Woman below it.

The overall panel with its three picture set-ups seems to be an articulation of elements but, even more so, a field of options. "Which picture will the camera end up in?" is one way of describing those options. This is where the sense of tragic irony comes from, for of all the pictures on that wall the one of the sea is the most highly illusionistic. Each of the pictures embodies a truth that the film we are watching when we view *WAVELENGTH* does not contain: the truth of revealing itself as a single image unit (a truth in direct opposition to the cinematic effect), the illusion of motion generated by 24 frames-per-second in conjunction with the persistence of vision and phi phenomenon.

The selection of the sea-wave shot is classical peripety or reversal of intention rendered through a plastic trope. Crossing the eighty-foot room on a paradoxical course of progressively flattening perspective but deepening perceptual truth, vitiating one illusionistic element or dimension after another, the camera ends up on the sea-wave still, and then, with both visual and aural crescendo (an electronic sine wave that goes from 50 cycles-per-second to 12,000 cycles-per-second during forty minutes of the film, but which takes its greatest leap at the point of superimposition of extreme close-up of the sea-wave shot on top of itself as the zoom moves *into* its frame), enters the sea-wave photo, filling the entire film frame on screen, forfeiting the "truth" of its discreteness as a single frame, absorbing and assimilating its illusionistic depth as its own. Thus, the film ends up where it began, caught in an illusion—but, this time, an illusion within an illusion with *allusion* to cosmic scale. It holds this in its field until, closing in so near, it obliterates everything. ■■■