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Excerpt

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Nostalgia film is historicist rather than historical, which explains why it must necessarily displace its center of interest onto the visual as such and substitute breathtaking images for anything like the older filmic story telling . . .

Fredric Jameson, "Transformations of the Image," *The Cultural Turn*

In an initial moment, the aim was the destruction of the (ideological) signified; in a second, it is the destruction of the sign.

Roland Barthes, "Change the Object Itself," *Image, Music, Text*

Christina Ricci is dressed up to look like Bette Davis (Figure 1) in a *Fashion of the Times* (Spring 2000) photo spread entitled "The Big Remake." What an image this is. Wasn't it just recently (in 1991 as a matter of fact) that Ricci appeared as that adorable evil child Wednesday in the film *The Addams Family*, itself a remake of the 1970s TV show of the same name and adapted from the 1950s *New Yorker* cartoon by Edward Gorey? And isn't Ricci just barely a child now? Or does it just seem that way, not only because this neophyte is presented to look like an actress from a half century ago, but also because the impulse to copy old images and old films is itself moving into its second generation? The practice continues from its first sightings in such films as *Star Wars* (1977) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), remakes of the 1950s science fiction films and 1940s Saturday afternoon serials, respectively, to more recent copies such as Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* (1998). Fredric Jameson was one of the first critics to note this style that affected works of high art and popular culture (the Ricci/Davis photo is, after all, an advertisement for designer clothes) and that crossed boundaries among photography, film, music, dance, painting, and literature. For Jameson this tendency was an effect of "postmodernism," a cultural condition caused by the rise of multinational capitalism and characterized by the features of pastiche and schizophrenia.¹

Jameson's assessments, however, have been widely debated,² often resulting in the acceptance or rejection of a theory whose actual practice has not yet been closely described. Jameson's insights are both crucial and prophetic, but they are nonetheless broad enough to allow the peculiarities and differences of many of the works they cover to remain undefined. This book is dedicated to addressing art and film during this period and to noting the possible sites of resistance in this culture-wide pull to the past.

The most crucial aspect of pastiche, as described by Jameson, is its impact on our perception of history. According to Jameson, the use of pastiche, as the imitation of past styles without parody's derision or laughter, is of such insistence in our society that it actually signals an impeded ability to represent our own time and to locate our own place in history. Related to this temporal confusion, Jameson also notes a troubling sense of surface and a loss of meaning in contemporary works. He describes this as "schizophrenia," a quality that renders the signifiers of cultural products (whether the surface of the image, the sounds in music, or the words in literature) dense, material, and so not able to convey their full meaning. From Jameson's description, it seems that this temporal and linguistic density erects a type of barrier, blocking reference to the natural real (that is, to real things in the world) and to history. So when Jameson asks whether there can be a form of resistance within postmodernism,³ we can assume that if there were one, its purpose would be to rupture these obdurate and a-historical surfaces. Jameson proposes a similar strategy in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capital*. He writes, "Only by means of violent formal and narrative dislocation could a narrative apparatus come into being capable of restoring life and feeling to . . . our capacity to organize and live time historically."⁴ The questions that now arise are *how* this might be accomplished in practice and to what extent such an effect could be attained.

In the present study I will consider the possibility of resistance in film and art practice, both commercial and avant-garde, across the decades from the 1970s to the 1990s. The notion of a critical art, however, must be newly formulated for this period since it utilizes a set of strategies less assaultive than those of modernism, yet no less crucial to consider. Hal Foster has already posited the existence of a "resistant postmodernism" in the fine arts,⁵ as well as presenting a more encompassing discussion of the return of the real as a thing of trauma in recent works. Here the "real" is posited as the negative of the symbolic, i.e., that which

cannot be represented, but which nonetheless returns in contemporary art through repetition, or by rupturing the image screen erected against it.⁶ The formal components of this or similar strategies within commercial film, however, have not yet been addressed. Of course, high art and especially the avant-garde have long staged acts of aesthetic and political resistance, but how do we now approach a commercial practice that uses the components of popular culture to in turn resist them? The answer might be found in the often quoted, but rarely defined, “blurring of distinction between high art and popular culture.” The idea of such a blurring is widely used to describe the practice of incorporating artifacts of popular culture into works of high art (Hollywood movies in Godard films, Elvis Presley in Andy Warhol paintings, or B-movies in Cindy Sherman photographs). What can we say, however, of commercial films that also incorporate old movies? Are these merely works of nostalgia as Jameson has suggested? Or can the critical dynamic flow in the opposite direction as well? That is, can mass art be infused with high art criticality, and more, can we claim that it does so in a historically specific way?

To understand such a practice we must first suggest an appropriately new critical approach, one based on the changed status of the photographic/film image itself. In film criticism, this would necessitate a shift away from the modernist concerns with perspectival space, point of view, or with the film apparatus itself. The focus would instead be shifted onto the distinctive structuring of meaning in the photographic/film image, one privileging its temporality and textuality.⁷ This shift is especially apt because the practice under discussion often presents the image in a distinctive way. Here the image is seen as “returned” from the past, and is frequently composed of material referencing old movies. That is, the image returns not as representational of the natural real, but as simulacral, as a copy of copies whose original has been lost. A play of references is thus engendered, one now highly coded with pastness. It is here that the connection between high art and mainstream film can be posited. In film, especially in the nostalgia film where high levels of pastiche are used, past film images often return, as do narrative elements from past or outmoded film genres. On this dual register, then, one that concerns *a changed status of the film image, and the return of the classical film genres, both as past coded signifying systems*, we can posit a relationship between high art practice and commercial film practice during this period. Before we can describe the possible methods of resistance within such a

practice, we must look to the significant debates on the photographic/film image across the century. In relationship to these strategies of investigation and breakdown of film as a representational system, we can then better approach the reconstructed images and genres of contemporary practice.

The Photographic/Film Image

It is important to distinguish the photographic/film image from other forms of reproduction, and especially from the current rise of televisual and digital images that threaten its existence. Photography represents a nineteenth-century process, distinctive at the point of its genesis and of its reception. As an imprint of light on emulsion, it has often been described as creating an image more profoundly related to the aspect of reality it reproduces, and as hotter or more personal than those of newer technologies. And for Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the very invention of photography represented a profound anthropological event, one that not only changed the nature and the function of art as a whole, but also introduced the art of film. Over the century of its invention, however, this photographically reproduced image has been interrogated and disrupted by artists and filmmakers in an effort to better understand the generating principle of the cinema itself.

In a scene from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Les Carabiniers* (1963), for example, an itinerant soldier mistakes the projected film image of a nude woman in a bathtub as being the real thing. This hapless soldier rushes up to the screen, claws at it, and tries to get inside the tub – or at least to see over the side of its enamel rim. All efforts, of course, are fruitless, leaving him only grasping at the bland white film screen, while his body becomes the knobby surface on which the light from his lusted-for object is projected. Nearly a century of film theory has given us insights into explaining both the desire and the illusion that Godard demonstrates in this sequence. Benjamin, for one, noted that this new film medium depleted the reproduced object of its “aura,” its presence, while simultaneously bringing it closer to us than it had ever been. Art and nature were no longer objects at a distance. Now the Mona Lisa, the Grand Canyon, and even a nude woman could all be brought into our immediate space, yet be held profoundly distinct from it.

We could then maintain that it is this play of presence and absence, this relay of perpetual and unattainable desire, that causes the film image to hold such fascination for us. But of course film also tells a story. In fact, it is the dual system of image and narrative that compounds our interest in film.⁸ The American film industry, especially, has gained its mass-market potential on the active integration of these two systems. In Hollywood, the film image and the narrative continuity are fashioned to render a form of realism, a kind of transparency, through which the fictive world of the film can be viewed. It would seem, then, that it is this composite of image and narrative that holds our fascination and that constructs the mythic and artistic universe of the film.

Certain filmmakers across the history of cinema, however, have seen the Hollywood type of cinematic representation as illusionistic, as embodying a capitalist ideology in its very form. They have subsequently attempted to drastically reduce conventional narrative so that a meditation on the film image could be made more explicit and so that its illusion of a fictive reality could be broken. The Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov, for example, took this position by relinquishing traditional theatrical artifice and conventional narrative in his film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Although Vertov's film predates Benjamin's essay, it is almost a test case for this renowned critic's analysis of film's properties. The camera eye in Vertov's film is demonstrated to be superior in its visual capability to the human eye. This new mode of reproduction, of perception, is now able to cut deep into reality, showing us multiple views, and, because it is not tied to the physical limitations of the body, even perspectives not humanly possible. We see from beneath a speeding train, for example, but we also see as the camera splits the image in two, superimposes another over it, slows time, or even stops time in a freeze frame. And in Vertov's film this is all done with the apparatus visible: The camera, the cameraman, the film strip, the editing machine, the projector, as well as the theater seats and the audience itself are all manifestly seen.

Man with a Movie Camera is often seen as part of a tradition within the avant-garde that strove to construct film art from the properties theorized as intrinsic to the medium. Vertov's belief in the importance of the photographic image and in its relationship to reality is echoed in the works and theories of Maya Deren, the woman often acknowledged as a pioneer and champion of the American avant-garde film, or "New American Cinema." In her theoretical essay, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality" (1960), Deren argues for a film art that would stay true to

the photographic base of the film image and to its ability to reproduce reality. Deren's belief in the film image lies in her acknowledgment of the unique type of image created by the camera, one profoundly dissimilar from other modes of pictorial reproduction. She argues that all drawing or painting, no matter how "realistic," is ultimately an expression of a personal perception and of the artist's hand. But with a camera, just a click of the shutter and the world imparts an image through the imprint of its light. For this reason, Deren maintains that the photographic image is the equivalent of reality itself and can be manipulated by the artist through a process of creative combination.

Both Vertov's and Deren's theories and film practices may seem quaint to us today. Vibrating in their high modernist moments, they display an unfettered enthusiasm for the cinematic apparatus, for the possibility of forging a new art, and for a belief in reality and the possibility of its representation. In our present world, however, we may find ourselves taking a more tempered, if not less enthusiastic, position. Through more recent theory we have been introduced to the idea that although a photographically reproduced image can be said to be a model for vision, or the "equivalent of reality," it is far from "natural," far from "innocent." In fact, after an image of reality has been imprinted and reproduced, a variety of conditions – namely, culture, history, and ideology – intercede in the reading of that image. Roland Barthes, of course, has been one of the most important writers on the photographic image,⁹ and his work was widely discussed in the 1970s. In his various essays, Barthes elaborates on the photographic image as a simple analogue to reality and sees it instead in terms of its structures of meaning. Here he identifies the photograph's indexical mark, its imprint from reality, as delivering a denotative message, and then goes on to note a culturally coded connotative message as well, one that varies according to the context in which the image is placed. In these structures, the photograph is distinctive from all other forms of representation. Although Barthes's work centers primarily on the photographic still rather than on film image itself, his notion of the photograph as a fragment, or "quote," a past frozen moment extracted from the continual flow of time, will be of use to our later discussion.

To return to the bathtub image from Godard's film, then, the misrecognition is ultimately not only on the part of the film's characters, who mistake the image for the real woman, but also on any reading that fails to acknowledge the complex of temporal and ideological components of

The Returned Image

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this sequence. The film is an “ongoing present tense” (unlike the photographic fragment, which stops time), but it is also a “time machine,”¹⁰ a carrier of once-lived worlds into the present, a quality that connects us to the past by what Barthes calls a “skin” of light.¹¹ So while the very stylistics of the film, the film stock, the costuming, the camera work, etc., may connote a cultural meaning – among other things, a Godard signature – they also bespeak an era, the historical context of the film itself. And any claim that this sequence represents the “reality” of desire has to succumb to the realization of the patriarchal positioning of the subject. The major impetus of what is represented here, as Laura Mulvey has argued, is primarily a *male* desire.¹²

Attacks on the Image

Even before these theories had destabilized the image and its relationship to reality, however, Maya Deren’s belief that film’s essence lies in its photographic base was rejected by a generation of 1960s avant-garde filmmakers. Stan Brakhage, for example, saw the very lens of the camera as ground to the dictates of Renaissance perspective (thus not part of film’s “essence” at all) and so advocated the willful destruction of the “reality” it produced. Brakhage practiced this destruction by any means necessary: spitting on the lens, for example, scratching the film, painting over it, using “inappropriate” film stocks, or employing rapid camera movements and superimpositions to blur its content, all to create a more personal, expressionistic vision. Other avant-garde filmmakers of the 1960s also strove to eradicate the illusionistic image in their explorations of film form. Peter Kubelka exhibits an extreme example of this tendency in *Arnulf Rainer* (1958–1960), a work that removed the image altogether and reduced film to the rhythmic alterations of white light and black frames.

Perhaps the most influential film of this later “Structural” period, however, was Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967). Seemingly returning the representational image to the New American Cinema by featuring a single shot of a receding loft space, *Wavelength* nonetheless reduces the filmed image to the formal properties of time and space. This is accomplished by the eroding conditions of time, a forty-five-minute zoom from one end of the loft to the other, and by the use of colored gels placed over the lens to articulate the image’s flatness. But it is the absence of a conventional

narrative itself, a system that usually distracts us from the literal passage of time, that serves to make the image in *Wavelength* palpable as an image. Here, across the duration of the film, and the literal experience of cinematic time and space, we are confronted with the two-dimensional quality of the film image itself.

The New Image

By the mid-1970s, however, the avant-garde had seemingly exhausted its reductionist, anti-illusionist meditations on film. Moreover, avant-garde institutions such as Anthology Film Archives, along with its major critics, Annette Michelson and P. Adams Sitney, had become the “establishment,” or at least they represented a set of ideas and standards that no longer seemed viable to a new generation of artists. What resulted was a change in practice that was often described as the “end of the avant-garde film,”¹³ or as “postmodern art.” These terms certainly seemed accurate at the time when describing works that had all the force and enthusiasm of a break with established art institutions, and with modernist practice itself.

This break also evidenced a kind of return to the call once made by Maya Deren. In a distinctive group of works, such as in those of Jack Goldstein and Robert Longo, the photographic base of film was again being acknowledged, although in a highly mediated form. And what looked like a “return to the image” was actually a renewed position from which to stage its investigation. First displayed in 1977 at a group show entitled “Pictures,” and later continuing into a wider practice, the new work often centered on film images from the past. These images were pictures of pictures, images that often made reference to older photographic or cinematic sources rather than to a natural real. Moreover, these “pictures” were not necessarily presented in medium-specific form (as mandated by the critic Clement Greenberg and his modernist dictates¹⁴), but were instead embodied by a number of different mediums: drawing, sculpture, photography, performance, sound recordings, or even film. In this way a number of different mediums could be used to “stage a picture”¹⁵ and so address now the very structuring of meaning and temporality in the film/photographic image.¹⁶

Aside from the works just noted, the actual films created by the art world during this period were very unlike those of an earlier generation, especially when compared to the highly abstract Structuralist practice that

immediately preceded it. This was especially true of the New York Punk or “New Wave” (sometimes even referred to as “No Wave”) filmmakers, such as Amos Poe, Eric Mitchell, or Beth and Scott B, whose work was purposefully shoddy, unintellectual, and unaesthetic. What’s more, these Punk films ironically returned the “image” and “narrative” to the avant-garde after a long period of dissolution, and they did so in terms that connoted the past. Filled with references to Film Noir, Warhol, and European art film sources (and sometimes ironically billed as “Godard remakes”), the Punk films were nonetheless perceived as little more than *fin-de-siecle* jokes and have not been carefully evaluated by avant-garde criticism. The lack of apparent seriousness in these Punk films also made them seem different from the high art work of the period, such as the gallery-exhibited films of Jack Goldstein, the film-inspired photographs of Cindy Sherman, or the multimedia productions of Robert Longo.

The Punk filmmakers produced expendable and largely nonsalable experimental works. It should be noted, however, that these filmmakers and the media artists cited here shared a similar set of tenets and, as we shall see, a similar set of practices. Moreover, they shared a similarly curious long-term goal: many of these “avant-garde” artists wanted to cross not only media boundaries, but art/mass culture boundaries as well. In short, they wanted to make commercial Hollywood movies. And many did just that. Downtown Punk filmmaker Amos Poe, for example, wrote and directed the commercial film *Rocket Gibraltar* (1988), while Kathryn Bigelow directed a number of Hollywood films including *Near Dark* (1987) and *Blue Steel* (1990). Fine artists also moved into the mainstream of filmmaking, with Robert Longo directing *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995); David Salle, *Search and Destroy* (1995); Cindy Sherman, *Office Killer* (1997); and Julian Schnabel, *Basquiat* (1996) and *Before Night Falls* (2000).

The Nostalgia Film

Having noted a tendency to return to past film images in art practice, we next ask, What similar strategies can be identified within the commercial film? Jameson can again provide us with a point of departure. According to Jameson, the return of past forms is especially apparent in what he calls the “nostalgia film.” The dictionary defines nostalgia as a “longing for experiences, things, or acquaintanceships belonging to the

past.” For Jameson, however, nostalgia in postmodern film is not so much a re-presentation of a particular historical period as it is a re-creation of its *cultural artifacts*. The past is metonymically reexperienced, not only through the represented clothing styles and music, but also through the stylistic elements from films of the 1930s to the 1950s. To understand how these returns operate in practice, however, it is crucial to isolate the properties of the cinematic medium used to create this effect.

Jameson gives us some guidance in this regard. He names *American Graffiti* (1973) as the inaugural nostalgia film, noting the use of 1950s dress styles and period cars to indicate a return to the past. And although another of his examples, *Body Heat* (1981), is set in the present, Jameson maintains that the film nonetheless connotes the past through the 1940s design of its titles, the old-time “feel” of its locations, and the type of actors cast in its roles. Jameson also cites the use of old movie plots in nostalgia films, with *Body Heat* (1981) drawn from *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* drawn from the adventure serials of the 1940s. Because of the allusive and elusive referencing of these old movies plots, however, Jameson concludes that the nostalgia film tells us stories that are no longer our own.¹⁷

In discussing the *mise-en-scene* of the image and the films’ dramatic content, however, Jameson’s examples comprise the films’ theatrical elements and not the medium’s ontological properties. We must thus inquire further into how film itself is being manipulated to effect the return of past forms. From Jameson’s examples, we can appreciate that the connotative aspects of both image and narrative are being engaged. So, while the period objects in the *mise-en-scene* create the “look and feel” of pastness, this quality is also emitting from the sensual surface of the images themselves. In a way that is distinctive of this era of filmmaking, the lighting, the choice of colors, and the grain of the film, as well as its composition and framing, may all be manipulated to refer to past images. In a similar vein, what is significant is not just that the nostalgia films return to old stories, but also that they return to old film genres, and to those genres’ imagistic and narrative signifying systems. The past thus returns through the composite of an old generic universe. *Body Heat*, for example, draws from Film Noir of the 1940s; *Star Wars*, from the science fiction genre of the 1950s; *Silverado* (1985), from the Western; and, as we shall see in our later examples, *Badlands* (1973), from the crime film.

These nostalgia films, however, are distinctive from earlier genre practice because their use of generic convention is often partial, and in many