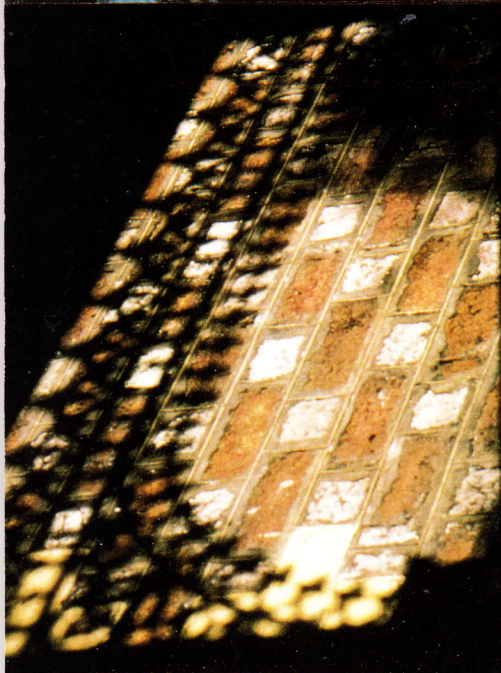
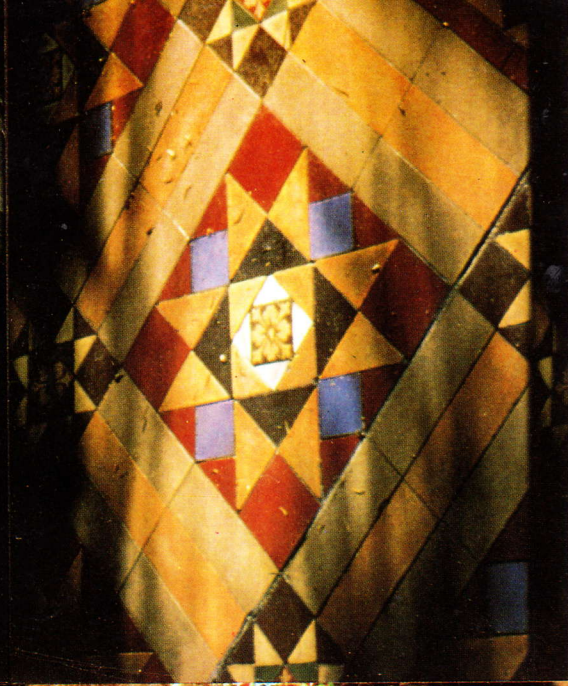
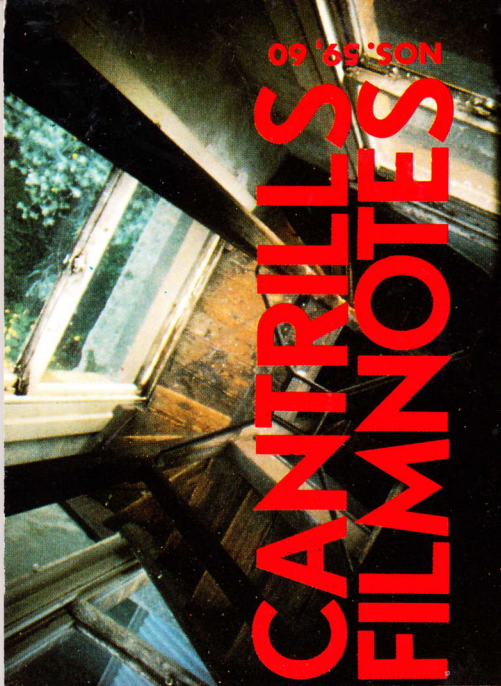


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**CANTRILLS  
FILMNOTES**



# CANTRILLS FILMNOTES

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**Front cover:** frames from **Projected Light** (1988) by Arthur and Corinne Cantrill

**Back cover:** frames from **Autumn Light** (1989) by Arthur and Corinne Cantrill.

◁**Opposite:** strips from **Home Movie** (1989) by Richard Frenken (See also page 62).

(Technical note: all the above were printed from 16mm original onto Cibachrome.)

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# Between Agonism and the Autonomy of Art: The Case of Al Razutis

By William C. Wees

THE Razutis phenomenon casts an interesting light on the status of avant-garde film today.<sup>1</sup> By 'phenomenon,' I mean an amalgam of the man and his films, writings, mixed media presentations, and other public performances in which the central character has the large physique and high, husky voice of the person named Al Razutis, but is more appropriately thought of as a construction of textual extracts, rhetorical strategies, and symbolic gestures suited to the polemical needs of the moment.

Although Razutis has left Canada, where he lived from 1968 until last year, and has separated himself, at least temporarily, from the avant-garde film scene — he claims to be in Baja California 'devot[ing] his full attention to surfing'<sup>2</sup> — the Razutis phenomenon remains to be understood and correctly placed in the historical and cultural development of avant-garde art. That is what I will attempt to do here, with the help of two theorists of avant-garde art, Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger. Although Poggioli and Bürger have little in common as far as their premises and methodologies are concerned (except for their mutual lack of interest in film as a source of avant-garde art), both have proven useful in my own efforts to come to terms with the Razutis phenomenon. I refer specifically to Poggioli's formulation of an avant-garde frame of mind he calls 'agonism,' and Bürger's assessment of collage techniques as the avant-garde's most effective means of undermining the autonomy of art in bourgeois society. In the light of these two considerations, Razutis' accomplishment not only becomes clearer but more defensible than his detractors have been willing to admit.

Poggioli specifies four 'moments' in the psychology of avant-garde movements. The first is *activism*, 'a sportive enthusiasm' and fascination with action for its own sake. The second is *antagonism*, an oppositional stance and combative action directed against traditional aesthetics and social norms. The third is *negativism*, the most destructive extreme of antagonism, neatly summed up in statements of two seminal figures in the history of the avant-garde. Mayakovsky: 'I write *nikhil* on anything that has been done before.' And Tristan Tzara: 'There is a great, destructive, negative task to be done: sweeping up, cleaning out.'<sup>3</sup> Finally there is

*agonism*, the most complex and, in my view, the most interesting category of avant-garde attitudes, because it combines elements of the other three — activism, antagonism and nihilism — with a profound sense of alienation that arises when '[a movement] no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition. It even welcomes and accepts this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements.'<sup>4</sup>

Formally, the agonistic moment is translated into what Poggioli calls the 'hyperbolic image,' a mode of expression revealing a Nietzschean 'will to transcend the human condition and the very limits of the real.'<sup>5</sup> Hyperbole, in this sense, is not simply extreme exaggeration, but an attempt to express the inexpressible (reflecting the agonistic artist's struggle to attain the unattainable), and it places an unbearable strain on the coherence of the work of art. Poggioli treats Walt Whitman as exemplary of the hyperbolic in literature. A more contemporary example might be *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound. In their effort to recount, and account for, the history of Western culture, *The Cantos* finally break up on the rocks of Pound's outsized ambition. 'I cannot make it cohere,' Pound confessed in Canto XCVI. William Carlos Williams' *Patterson*, Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, and John Dos Passos' sprawling *U.S.A.* trilogy offer similar, if less tragic, symptoms of incoherence. In this sense, incoherence does not mean meaninglessness or a lack of artistic merit, but simply a failure to achieve an organic unity in which all parts cohere into an imaginatively graspable and intellectually satisfying whole. (By contrast, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Proust's *A La Recherche du temps perdu*, and Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* might be examples of modern works on a grand scale that do cohere in the sense I am proposing here.)

The major works of Pound, Williams, Olson, and Dos Passos not only offer examples of Poggioli's 'hyperbolic image,' but exemplify the collage techniques to which I will turn shortly. Before making that turn, however, I want to add another work to the list of hyperbolic texts, or in Bart Testa's apt phrase, 'epics of concatenation.' That work is, of course, Al Razutis' *Amerika* (1972-1983), which Testa compares unfavourably to Laurie Anderson's *United States* in an article published in *C Magazine* a few years ago.<sup>6</sup>

The hyperbolic quality of *Amerika* is indicated by its length and heterogeneity: a three-hour film composed of seventeen sections, most of which first appeared as separate films between 1972 and 1983 when Razutis cobbled them together into a single work of vast scope, mixed messages, and an overly ambitious program for the analysis and critique of capitalist, patriarchal, and media-saturated modern society. In calling *Amerika* 'a mosaic that expresses the various sensations, myths, landscapes of the industrialized Western culture . . .',<sup>7</sup> Razutis reveals his

affinity with the grandiose projects of figures like Whitman, Dos Passos, and Hart Crane (whose transcendent vision of America past and present, *The Bridge*, offers another example of agonistic hyperbole, as well as another use of collage techniques). Another relevant comment by Razutis appears on the soundtrack of the film itself. In the section called *Photo Spot* Razutis remarks, 'I'm working on a metaphor and the elements are not compatible.' To this equivalent of the Poundian disclaimer, 'I cannot make it cohere,' Bart Testa responds, 'This admission is all too true — the 'metaphor,' the structure, never gells and that failure leaves only ugly petulance.'<sup>8</sup>

Setting aside the question of 'petulance' for a moment, I would propose that Amerika's 'failure' is built into its very conception as a 'mosaic' or 'metaphor' of incompatible elements, and that it might be viewed more generously as a demonstration of avant-garde agonism which 'welcomes and accepts [its] self-ruin' in order to pursue a self-imposed mission to expose and exorcise the corrupting influences of modern culture. In fact, the agonism of Amerika approaches the extreme condition Poggioli describes as follows: '... avant-garde artists sometimes allowed themselves to be completely seduced by an agonism which was almost gratuitous, by a sense of sacrifice and a morbid taste for present suffering that was not conceived of as self-immolation on behalf of future generations.'<sup>9</sup> Confronted by a seemingly 'gratuitous' agonism in Amerika, unsympathetic viewers like Testa are inclined to treat the film as, at best, a re-hash of 1960s counter-culture critiques of dominant American culture, and at worst an audio-visual tantrum of inordinate length and unnecessary technical virtuosity. Such a response, I suggest, arises from the failure to appreciate the film's tumult of diverse sounds, images, visual styles, cinematic techniques, and rhetorical gambits, as characteristic symptoms of avant-garde agonism and its penchant for the 'hyperbolic image.'

What Testa dismisses as Razutis' 'petulance' might be seen as the exasperation characteristic of many avant-garde artists who fear that their revolutionary message will fall on deaf ears and blind eyes — not because people cannot hear or see, but because their senses have been numbed by habit, by the repetitiveness of everyday life, and most especially in our time, by the incessant stimulation and false gratification manufactured by the mass media. In addition to all this, the avant-garde artist is confronted with our culture's assumption that art is irrelevant to everyday life, that it is, in a word, autonomous.

At the level of theory, the basis for the autonomy of art can be found in Kant's propositions about art's 'purity,' its total disengagement from practical concerns, be they commercial, ethical or religious. Art's glory is to be use-less in a world where everything else is put to some more or

less practical use. At the level of production, Aestheticism, *l'art pour l'art*, most fully embodied this vision of art's autonomy. And at the level of the reception and consumption of art, the autonomy of art suited the evolving structures of bourgeois society. As Peter Bürger puts it, 'The process by which the social subsystem 'art' evolves into a wholly distinct entity is part and parcel of the developmental logic of bourgeois society.'<sup>10</sup> While art's status of autonomy keeps it 'pure,' it also effectively prevents art from influencing the way people live their lives, and indeed, the way they might change their lives — and society — for the better.

To undermine the autonomy of art was, in Bürger's view, the principal project of the avant-garde, and the principal formal technique for accomplishing that goal was what Bürger calls montage or collage, and sums up in the phrase 'the insertion of reality fragments in the work of art.' Here Bürger was following the lead of Theodore Adorno, for whom montage was the *sine qua non* of modern art. 'Ever since the beginning of modernism,' says Adorno, 'art has absorbed objects from outside, leaving them as they are without assimilating them (e.g. montage).'<sup>11</sup> His model for montage was the *papier collée* of early cubism, where, as he said, 'the non-illusory debris of real life is to be let into the work.'<sup>12</sup> Thus montage was a way to critique art's illusory representations of reality, and at the same time, undermine the presumed unity of art. In Adorno's words, montage 'articulates discontinuity' and 'leaves scars on the dimension of meaning.' It should, he said, 'shock people into realizing how dubious any unity [is].'<sup>13</sup>

Bürger restates Adorno's argument in the following way:

The insertion of reality fragments into the work of art fundamentally transforms that work. The artist not only renounces shaping a whole, but gives the painting a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art. They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they are reality.<sup>14</sup>

To the argument that once these 'reality fragments' are inserted into a work of art, they will be decoded according to aesthetic systems of signification, Bürger's response is that the reality of these fragments will force the audience to decode the art's message differently. As he puts it, 'The recipient of an avant-garde work discovers that the manner of appropriating intellectual objectifications that has been formed by the reading of organic works of art is inappropriate to the present object.'<sup>15</sup> It is inappropriate because the parts do not cohere into a unified, meaningful, organic whole. 'This refusal to provide meaning,' Bürger says, 'is experienced as shock by the recipient,' and shock, in Bürger's view, 'is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a

change in the recipient's life praxis.<sup>16</sup> This is the crux of the matter for Bürger: 'to break through aesthetic immanence' is to destroy the autonomy of art and open up the possibility of shaping life praxis according to the humane values art has rescued from the inhumane means-ends rationality of bourgeois culture.

In order to apply Bürger's theory of montage to a film like *Amerika*, it is necessary to determine what 'fragments of reality' might be in an art form that cannot include actual pieces of reality such as the scraps of cloth, wallpaper, newspaper, posters, tram tickets and the like, which were stuck on the canvasses of cubist collages. Yet, to be effective, to undermine the work's unity, the fragments inserted into a film should satisfy Bürger's demand for montage elements that 'are no longer signs pointing to reality . . . but *are* reality.' What, then, are the filmmaker's 'fragments of reality'?

For Razutis, they are extracts from film and television, which are inserted into his film without losing the marks of their origins. The fact that the fragments come from the mass media makes them no less real (one can no longer exclude the sounds and images of the mass media from the modern paradigm of reality), nor is their disruption of the film's unity any less apparent because the film and its 'fragments of reality' originate in the same photo-chemical and electronic processes of reproduction. Because the fragments continue to evoke their original contexts so directly and unambiguously, they can be read not only as signs signifying their sources, but as *fragments* of those sources, as 'non-illusory debris of real life.'

In Razutis' *Amerika* most of the 'debris' from television (news, ads, game shows) and from movies is matted into shots of huge urban billboards, thus emphasizing the link between commerce and the iconography of the mass media. For the section called *A Message From Our Sponsor*, however, Razutis adopts the more familiar technique of directly intercutting 'reality fragments' from, in this case, TV ads and a graphically explicit pornographic film. The 'message' from Razutis in this and other sections of the film may be less than surprising: sex sells and ads sell sex; TV reduces everything — from game shows to wartime violence — to the same level of public entertainment; the modern urban environment is an alienating wasteland, etc. But it is the implication of Razutis' method, not his message, that I want to stress here.

While it may not be more original than the methods of Pat O'Neill, Stan Vanderbeek, Bruce Conner, Arthur Lipsett, and a number of other film *collagistes*, I think it is more successful in resisting the wholeness and organic unity crucial to the ideology of autonomous art. Whereas most collage-filmmakers use graphic, rhythmic, and thematic associations to create a new kind of unity for the diverse sounds and images they bring

into their films, Razutis is more inclined to let the diversity stand, to 'leave scars on the dimension of meaning' and 'shock people into realizing how dubious any unity [is],' to repeat two of Adorno's propositions on montage. Thus, *Amerika*'s failure to cohere into a meaningful whole is not only a sign of avant-garde agonism and its characteristic trope, the hyperbolic image, but a political ploy in an avant-garde campaign *against* the autonomy of art, and *for* the integration of art and life praxis.

But is such a campaign still viable? Bürger readily admits that the most radical goal of the avant-garde — the reintegration of art and life praxis — was never achieved, and that even works of the historical avant-garde have been institutionalized and granted the very autonomy they were intended to challenge (as can be seen, for example, in the 'Duchamp Room' of the new Canadian National Gallery of Art, where copies of Duchamp's 'ready-mades' are displayed with the institutional respect that the original 'ready-mades' were supposed to mock). Moreover, today a 'neo-avant-garde,' as Bürger labels it, 'institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions.'<sup>17</sup>

It is specifically the institutionalizing of 'the avant-garde as art' that Razutis has chosen to attack by reviving the 'genuinely avant-gardiste intentions' of the historical avant-garde — of Marinetti, Apollinaire, Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Duchamp, Mayakovsky, Dziga Vertov, the young Sergei Eisenstein, and many others who challenged the time-honoured autonomy of art. The institutionalizing of the historical avant-garde has tended to obscure the degree to which these avant-garde activists could be abrasive, sly, crude, witty, farcical, enigmatic, infantile, scatological in their dealings with the public, with the institutions of art, and sometimes with each other. Their articles, manifestos, public performances, and, of course, their art, temporarily opened fissures in the institutional walls of art and let in some of the light and fresh air of life. Though the walls quickly closed again, Bürger argues that the one lasting effect of the historical avant-garde was to make the institution of art clearly visible, so that no one should be able to ignore the role of art as an institution, or subsystem, of bourgeois society.

Razutis has tried to keep the original avant-garde project alive, with the difference that his attacks are not directed at the traditional institution of art, but at its reincarnation in the 'neo-avant-garde.' Hence his diatribes against many of his fellow filmmakers who have taken shelter in universities, curatorial jobs, art magazines, critical journals, and other venues that tend to perpetuate the institution of art and its autonomy. He has attacked these tendencies in articles, manifestos, and mixed media events like 'Kalling All Kanadian Critics' at the Funnel in Toronto in December 1986,<sup>18</sup> and his intervention at a panel discussion held at the new Pacific Cine Centre in Vancouver in March of the same year. The lat-

ter event also provided the material for a film, *On the Problem of the Autonomy of Art in Bourgeois Society, Or Splice* (1986, by Razutis with the assistance of Scott Haynes and Doug Chomyn), which draws its title directly from the title of the third chapter of Burger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

A brief description of that film can serve as a summary and concluding comment on the Razutis phenomenon in relation to the avant-garde today. The topic for discussion at the Cine Centre was 'Avant-Garde Film Practice' and the panelists represented a cross-section of the Canadian avant-garde film world of the mid-1980s: Michael Snow, Patricia Gruben, David Rimmer, Joyce Weiland, Ross McLaren, and Razutis. The film combines an edited version of each participant's remarks with a kind of homage-parody of their characteristic filmmaking styles.<sup>19</sup>

As Snow extols the individualism of avant-garde filmmakers in general and of his own film practice in particular ('I don't claim to be avant-garde but to make the films of Michael Snow . . .'), an electronic tone slowly rises in pitch, the camera executes a slow zoom-in on Snow as he speaks, and permutations on the words 'so is this' (the title of Snow's 1982 film composed entirely of words appearing one at a time to an accompaniment of total silence) are superimposed on the image. Gruben talks about feminism and narrative in avant-garde film while her image appears on several TV sets stacked in front of a vista of forest, sea and sky, and her words appear as a visual text travelling across the bottom of the screen. Rimmer expounds on the pure visual pleasure offered by the cinematic image, while *his* image is re-worked through an optical printer and made increasingly abstract in the manner of his *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*. Weiland and McLaren sit at a table, sip wine, chat about film and film criticism, exchange gossip (Weiland refers to 'Laura and Peter whose marriage has broken up'), and comment favourably on the facilities of the Cine Centre. While the camera pans from one to the other, words and dates (as in Weiland's 1933) are superimposed on the image, and toward the end of this section, calls of a loon (alluding to Weiland's *The Far Shore*) can be heard on the sound track.

Razutis' own section of the film is the longest and least tampered with visually and aurally. Its principal theme is the mystification produced by current film theory and, most specifically, by the way film theory serves the institution of art by insulating the avant-garde from life praxis. After exchanging critical jargon with a ventriloquist's dummy, along the lines of the following:

**Razutis:** So how does subjectivity fit into this? How is it structured?

**Dummy:** Alienation, gap, castration, the whole ball of wax.

**Razutis:** What do you see when you look at a movie, a screen?  
**Dummy:** The imaginary signifier, don't you?

Razutis then announces that he can 'offer a perspective on direct action and the avant-garde,' and launches into a verbal manifesto characteristic of the historical avant-garde, but adapted to the immediate context:

The avant-garde does not ingratiate itself to an audience or institution. It kicks ass . . . Avant-garde does not subordinate itself to collectivism, but is a dialectic between individuality and group . . . It is not elitist, academic, politically correct . . . Some things require direct action so that something other than memory remains. A trace of the avant-garde if nothing else. [At this point Razutis takes out a can of spray paint and begins shaking it as he continues speaking.] The academics don't like rude and impertinent behaviour because academia has a sort of code of etiquette: things that are shit are called problematical. One doesn't get up and do demonstrable things.

Whereupon, Razutis gets up and uses the spray can to write on the pristine walls of the Cine Centre, 'AVANT-GARDE SPTS IN THE FACE . . .' In the film one cannot see the rest of the phrase, but it is not hard to guess what it must be.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the International Experimental Film Congress held in Toronto, Canada, May 28 - June 4, 1989. With the exception of one of Razutis' 'visual essays,' *Lumiere's Train (Arriving at the Station)* (1979), none of Razutis' work was shown at the Congress, nor was Razutis present.
2. Al Razutis, 'Nothing Personal,' *Independent Eye* (Newsletter of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre in Toronto), Vol. 10, No. 1 (Fall 1988), p. 21.
3. Quoted in Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Harper & Row, Icon Editions, 1968), pp. 62-63.
4. Poggioli, p. 26.
5. Poggioli, p. 182.
6. Bart Testa, 'The Epic of Concatenation: On 'Amerika' and 'United States,'" *C Magazine*, No. 10 (Summer, 1986), pp. 46-55.
7. Al Razutis, note on *Amerika* in the catalogue of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution West (1983), p. 28.
8. Testa, p. 50.
9. Poggioli, p. 67.
10. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Tr. M. Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), p. 32.
11. Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Tr. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge &

Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 193.

12. Adorno, p. 222.

13. Adorno, p. 223.

14. Bürger, p. 78.

15. Bürger, p. 80.

16. Bürger, p. 80.

17. Bürger, p. 58.

18. For this event, Razutis invited a number of Canadian filmmakers and critics (including the present writer) to attend and/or submit statements on avant-garde film. Some of the statements were included in Razutis' presentation, as were slides showing some of the invitees receiving their invitations. Speaking through a voice modulator and wearing a peaked white cap suggestive of both a wizard and a potentate of the Ku Klux Klan, Razutis put on a performance that

mocked, as it imitated, a pastiche of modern and post-modern critical theories. At various points the performance also included the projection of slides, film projection, and multiple layerings of recorded and live sound: a performance collage not unlike *Amerika* in many ways. An acerbic critique of the event was published by Bart Testa in the Newsletter of the Film Studies Association of Canada, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1987), n.p.

19. Excerpts from the filmmakers' statements appear in *Speed* (Spring 1987), published by Cineworks, Vancouver, Canada, pp. 37-43. I have drawn upon this source for direct quotations from Razutis' filmed version of the event.

Editors' note: Al Razutis' *Amerika* has been acquired for the Film Lending Collection of the National Library of Australia, Canberra. □

