

Homeless Movies:
The Redemptive Project of the New American Cinema

By Joshua Guilford
B.A., Michigan State University, 2004
M.A., Brown University, 2007

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dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date _____
Mary Ann Doane, Advisor

Recommended to the Graduate Council

Date _____
Philip Rosen, Reader

Date _____
Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Reader

Approved by the Graduate Council

Date _____
Peter M. Weber, Dean of the Graduate School

CURRICULUM VITAE
JOSHUA GUILFORD

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH

16 September 1981, Flint, Michigan, USA

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Brown University, Modern Culture and Media, 2014
M.A. Brown University, Modern Culture and Media, May 2007
B.A. Michigan State University, English, December 2004

PUBLICATIONS

- 2015 “An Interview with Fern Silva,” *Millennium Film Journal*, forthcoming
2015
2014 “Against Transparency: Jonas Mekas, Vernon Zimmerman, and the West
Coast Contribution to the New American Cinema,” *Alternative
Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945-1980*, ed.
David E. James, forthcoming 2014, John Libbey
“Turning Inwards: the Politics of Privacy in the New American Cinema,”
Sounds and Visions: Music, Counterculture, and the Global 1968,
eds. Timothy S. Brown and Andrew E. Lison, Palgrave Macmillan,
2014
“Ron Rice,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, ed. Stephen Ross, et
al, forthcoming 2014
“The Flower Thief,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, ed. Stephen
Ross, et al, forthcoming 2014
2013 “Magic Lantern: Interviews with Ben Russell and Josh Guilford,”
INCITE: Journal of Experimental Media, 2013
2012 “Baudrillard, Obscenity, and the Intimate Cinema of Saul Levine,”
Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing Through the Discipline, ed.
James Elkins, et al, Routledge, 2012.

CONFERENCES AND INVITED TALKS (selected)

- 2014 “The Loop as Documentary,” Paper, *Codes and Modes: The Character of
Documentary Culture*, New York City, November 2014
2013 “Magic Lantern Cinema,” Invited Talk, *Microcinemas and Alternative
Media*, Undergraduate Seminar, Instructor: Lynne Sachs, The New
School, upcoming November 2013
“New Approaches to the Politics of the 1960s American Avant-Garde,”
Panel Co-Chair, with David Fresko, Erica Levin, and Juan A.
Suárez, *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*, Chicago, March
2013
“Ron Rice, Vagabond,” Paper, *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*,
Chicago, March 2013
2011 “The Homeless Movies of the New American Cinema,” Paper, *Visible*

- Evidence*, New York City, August 2011
- “The Homeless Movies of the New American Cinema,” Paper, *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*, New Orleans, March 2011
- “Curating Experimental Film and Video,” Invited Talk, *The Art of Curating*, Undergraduate Seminar, Instructor: Mark Tribe, Brown University, April 2011
- 2010 “The ‘Private Visions’ of the New American Cinema,” Paper, *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*, Los Angeles, March 2010
- 2008 “Recovering the Bones Brigade: Skateboard Videos and Publicity,” Paper, *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*, Philadelphia, March 2008
- 2006 “Breaking Windows from Baghdad: Insurgent Video and the Case of Juba,” Paper, *Spaces of Conflict*, San Francisco State University, November 2006

CURATING & CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (selected)

- 2014 “Ways to Fail,” The Film-Makers’ Cooperative, 5 September 2014, New York
- “Spaces Open & Closed: Five Films by Rosalind Nashashibi,” Le Petit Versailles, 12 July 2014, New York
- “Transanimations” McGill University, 7 June 2014, Montreal
- “New Year, New Works,” Millennium Film Workshop, Brooklyn Fire Proof, 25 January 2014, Brooklyn
- 2013 “An Archive of Intersections,” Film-Makers’ Cooperative, 22 October 2013, New York
- “Temporary Ocean (in Light and Sound),” Brattle Theater, in conjunction with *Balagan Film Series*, 17 October 2013, Cambridge
- “Temporary Ocean (in Light and Sound),” Machines with Magnets, 16 October 2013, Pawtucket
- “Gatherings,” Le Petit Versailles, in conjunction with the Millennium Film Workshop’s *A Collective Cinema*, 6 July 2013, New York
- “Time/s/pace,” AS220 Black Box Theater, 25 April 2013, Providence
- “Intimate Projections: Barbara Hammer, Peter Hutton, & Amie Siegel,” The New School, in conjunction with *Millennium Film Workshop Personal Cinema Series at The New School*, 17 April 2013, New York
- “Jennifer Reeves: Exuberant Emulsions,” The New School, in conjunction with *Millennium Film Workshop Personal Cinema Series at The New School*, 20 March 2013, New York
- “New from Old: Martha Colburn, Bradley Eros, & Colleen Fitzgibbon,” The New School, in conjunction with *Millennium Film Workshop Personal Cinema Series at The New School*, 20 February 2013, New York
- 2012 “Ship to Shore,” Post Office Square, in conjunction with *Balagan Film Series*, 25 August 2012, Boston
- “Ship to Shore,” Grant’s Block, 24 August 2012, Providence

- “Curious Magic: The Magic Lantern Slides of the Museum of Natural History,” Museum of Natural History and Planetarium, in conjunction with *Curiouser: Art, Science, and the Secret Life of Specimens*, 12-13 April 2012, Providence
- “Andy Warhol’s *Sleep*,” 40 Rice Street, in conjunction with *R.K. Projects*, 18 February 2012, Providence
- 2010 – 11 “Affect Unbounded: Selfhood, Collectivity, and the Politics of Feeling,” *Mellon Graduate Student Workshop*, Brown University, Providence
- 2009 – 10 *Modern Culture Workshop*, Brown University, Providence
- 2009 “The Private Show,” Cable Car Cinema & Café, 11 March 2009, Providence

TEACHING

- 2014 *Art of Film*, The New School, Media Studies
- 2013 *Experimental Cinema at Anthology Film Archives*, The New School, Eugene Lang College, Culture and Media
Intimate Film Cultures, The New School, Culture and Media
- 2012 *The Embattled Eye: Modernity, Visuality, and Cinema*, The New School, Culture and Media
- 2011 *The Art of the Film*, Brown University, Summer and Continuing Studies
- 2010 *Secret Flix: Privacy, Intimacy, and Cinema*, Brown University, Modern Culture and Media
- 2010 *The Art of the Film*, Brown University, Summer and Continuing Studies

TEACHING AND RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIPS

- 2011 *Text/Media/Culture*, Brown University, Modern Culture and Media
- 2009 – 2011 Research Assistant, Prof. Mary Ann Doane, Brown University, Modern Culture and Media
- 2009 *Text/Media/Culture*, Brown University, Modern Culture and Media
- 2008 *Screens and Projections*, Brown University, Modern Culture and Media
Digital Media, Brown University, Modern Culture and Media
- 2007 *Cinematic Coding and Narrativity*, Brown University, Modern Culture and Media
Text/Media/Culture, Brown University, Modern Culture and Media
- 2006 *Screens and Projections*, Brown University, Modern Culture and Media

AWARDS, GRANTS, & HONORS

- 2012 – 15 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation SEED Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
- 2014 Wave Farm Media Arts Assistance Fund Grant
- 2014 Malcolm S. Forbes Center for Culture and Media Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
- 2013 Malcolm S. Forbes Center Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
- 2012 Malcolm S. Forbes Center Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
Malcolm S. Forbes Center Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema

	Rhode Island Council for the Humanities Mini-Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
2011 – 12	Josephine de Kármán Dissertation Fellowship
2011	Malcolm S. Forbes Center Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
	Creative Arts Council Student Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
	Malcolm S. Forbes Center Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
2010 – 2011	Andrew Mellon Foundation Graduate Student Workshop Grant
2010	Malcolm S. Forbes Center Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
	Creative Arts Council Student Grant, for Magic Lantern Cinema
2009	Brown University Dissertation Fellowship
2008	Creative Arts Council Student Grant
	Malcolm S. Forbes Center Grant

REFERENCES

Professor Mary Ann Doane, Department of Film and Media, University of California, Berkeley, madoane@berkeley.edu

Professor Philip Rosen, Department of Modern Culture and Media, Brown University, philip_rosen@brown.edu

Professor Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Department of Modern Culture and Media, Brown University, wendy_chun@brown.edu

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HOMELESS MOVIES:
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AMERICAN CINEMA

by

Joshua Guilford

INTRODUCTION

RETURN TO THE NEW AMERICAN CINEMA

The New American Cinema (NAC) remains a murky object within film studies. It is generally accepted that the heading “New American Cinema” refers to a community of independent filmmakers that emerged in New York City in the late 1950s, which was working to establish an alternative cinema in the U.S. modeled loosely on the European “new waves” and existing in opposition to both Hollywood and the established art cinema. Yet accounts of the NAC’s period of activity, roster of participants, and filmography are highly varied, and this movement’s primary objectives, characteristics, and organizing principles have been framed in remarkably divergent ways.

This instability is not a recent development. The NAC’s status as a relatively coherent “movement” was the source of considerable anxiety for representatives of this film culture throughout its period of operation. The sheer quantity of appellations that the NAC’s main spokesperson, Jonas Mekas, temporarily applied to this film culture before begrudgingly settling on “New American Cinema” speaks to this anxiety: “new American wave,” “American New Wave,” “Ninth Wave,” “New American Cinema Group,” and “the Group” were all alternates to “New American Cinema” at one point or another, to say nothing of the term “underground.”¹ But the critic Ken Kelman addressed

¹ Jonas Mekas, “New York Letter: Towards a Spontaneous Cinema,” Sight and Sound 28.3-4 (Summer-Autumn 1959): 118; Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971 (New York: MacMillan, 1972) 14; “The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group,” Film Culture Reader, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square, 2000) 79. By 1962, Mekas was already expressing his discomfort with the designation “New American Cinema.” See Mekas, Movie Journal 68.

the problem of cultural stability more directly in his influential 1964 survey of the NAC, “Anticipations of the Light.” For Kelman, it was dangerous to apply the term “movement” to the NAC, given this term’s association with static aesthetic schools and categories rather than with dynamic processes such as that embodied by the NAC. Framing the NAC as a vital “release of energies,” Kelman asserts: “that movement which has been called New American Cinema... can no more be defined than any other form of life; it can be autopsied only when dead. No vivisection.”² Echoing the NAC’s call for films that would be “rough, unpolished, but alive” – its insistence that films not be “rosy” but rather “the color of blood” – Kelman here envisions the NAC as a *living cinema*, one whose rebellion against both “the exhaustion of film form at midcentury” and the “increasingly restrictive” character of the late-modern world required an anarchic embrace of instability.³

This dissertation initiates a return to the NAC, one that elucidates, while also questioning, the consequence this film culture attributed to the intimate, unruly, and disorganized vital impulse it sought to harness and transmit through the animating technology of cinema. What follows is not an autopsy, however, whether “autopsy” is conceived as an objective examination of a whole *corpus* or a deeply subjective “act of seeing with one’s own eyes.” I do not seek to present an exhaustive account of the NAC (my scope is narrower than the pathologist’s) or to compose a personal ode to the “visionaries” comprising this film culture (I evade the lure to trance). Rather, my project is to revisit the primary assertions and neuroses that recur throughout the films, writings, and practices of this film culture, and to reframe our view of the internal and external

² Ken Kelman, “Anticipations of the Light” in *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1967) 23, 22, originally published in *The Nation* 11 May 1964.

³ “First Statement” 83; Kelman 23, 24.

“pressure[s] for coherence” that organize these works and activities, thus allowing for a deeper understanding of the NAC’s accomplishments and limitations, repetitions and innovations.⁴ This dissertation is a revisionary study, in other words, one that problematizes existing perceptions of the NAC by resituating its most insistent claims, themes, and ambitions within a conceptual and historical context that awakens unexplored meanings and implications lying dormant within these claims.

While this decision to “go back” to the NAC might seem to mimic this film culture’s own redemptive project – its effort “to replenish the human spirit which has been eroded as much as our earth has been by ‘progress’” – it should be stated from the outset that this dissertation is not intended as a work of salvation.⁵ It does not seek to rescue the NAC from its detractors by championing it uncritically. The task here is to develop a critical framework that can adequately account for the irreducible tensions and contradictions that structure this film culture – tensions and contradictions whose existence reveals celebratory ballads of the NAC’s achievements to be as insufficient as dismissive caricatures of its defects.

My primary claim is that the NAC’s effort to redeem or replenish a dwindling realm of “spirit” must be understood as a response to the apparent decline of interiority initiated by the rise of a distinctly impersonal, late-modern world. To artists of the NAC, the dominant configurations of both private and public life in post-WWII American society seemed to be rendering the very notion of the inner self obsolete. They believed the development of a more vital, spontaneous, and intimate aesthetic was the most effective method through which to combat this process – an aesthetic modeled after a

⁴ Kelman 24.

⁵ Ibid 24.

wild, irrational mode of inner experience held to be incongruous with the excessive rationality of postwar culture. Yet the NAC's promotion of cinema as a "spiritual medium" was not a purely solipsistic endeavor.⁶ It was part of a larger effort to reorganize the cinema in a more intimate form, one capable of generating new and highly vitalizing experiences of inwardness and belonging through which the alienating effects of late modernity could be remedied.

The notion of "returning" to the NAC may seem somewhat confusing given the paucity of scholarly studies devoted specifically to this film culture. At the time of this writing, there is no academic book that takes the NAC as its specific object of study. This is not to say that researchers of the NAC are confronted with a scarcity of resources. It is to say that our understanding of the NAC has not come from an exhaustive or definitive scholarly inquiry into this film culture, but from a dispersed and heterogeneous set of primary and secondary resources that diverge and disagree as often as they overlap. These resources include: the films of the NAC themselves; critical, creative, and personal writings produced by artists and critics affiliated with this film culture; interviews, movie reviews, and popular journalism; critical and scholarly essays on individual authors and films, or select groupings of authors and films; scholarly works devoted to broader periods, genres, or categories that include the NAC, such as the American avant-garde, women's avant-garde film, or Beat cinema; scholarly studies of related offshoots of the NAC such as underground film, the Baudelarian cinema, or direct cinema; exhibition catalogues, program notes, newsletters, archival documents, and other forms of institutional discourse; and the more amorphous collection of anecdotes, gossip, and

⁶ Kelman 24.

myths that combine to make up avant-garde film legend.⁷ When viewed collectively, such materials cannot but fail to add up to a coherent picture. However, the multiple representations of the NAC contained within these materials conflict in ways that make the task of delineating and analyzing the NAC uniquely difficult.

It is illustrative in this regard to consider one of the more basic points of disagreement that structures these materials: the date of the NAC's demise. In *Film Culture Reader*, P. Adams Sitney situates this date as early as 1963. By 1963, he explains, a host of independent American filmmakers who were working to develop "a cinema of low-budget productions of high artistic interest, economically akin to the Off-Broadway theater, as it was then, or to the 'new waves' in France, Italy, England, and Eastern Europe," realized that their project for a "new cinema" had been a mere illusion.⁸

As he writes:

This illusion lasted while Jonas Mekas, Shirley Clarke, Adolfas Mekas, Robert Frank, John Cassavetes, and a number of others were making their first feature films; it ended abruptly when they had completed them and were seeking distribution for them and financing for further projects. In the wake of this illusion, The Film-Makers Cooperative was born [in the beginning of 1962]. Through it, the film-makers planned to distribute their own films and keep the income, minus a marginal percentage for operational costs. At this point, the low-budget film-makers joined forces with the 'experimental' film-makers, who had no budgets at all. Within a year, it was apparent that the Film-Makers Cooperative could not bring in sufficient funds to keep a director working on a \$25,000 budget, yet it

⁷ In addition to the texts discussed and cited in this introduction, notable works of criticism and scholarship related to the NAC include: P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); David E. James, ed., *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton, 1967); Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Jack Sargeant, *The Naked Lens: An Illustrated History of Beat Cinema* (London: Creation Books, 1997); Louis Marcorelles, *Living Cinema: New Directions in Contemporary Film-making*, tr. Isabel Quigley (New York: Praeger, 1973); Caryl Rowe, *The Baudelarian Cinema: A Trend Within the American Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1982).

⁸ P. Adams Sitney, "The New American Cinema" in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. Sitney (New York: Cooper Square, 2000) 71.

could help to sustain the avant-gardists. Thus, *Film Culture* drifted from being the forum for low-budget film directors to that of the most radical innovators.⁹

In Sitney's little history of the American avant-garde, the NAC is equated with the New American Cinema Group (hereafter referred to as "The Group"): an organization of filmmakers that included many of the artists mentioned by Sitney, as well as figures such as Lionel Rogosin, Gregory Markopoulos, and Alfred Leslie, who were committed to establishing an alternative network of production, distribution, and exhibition in the U.S. According to Sitney, the dream of a new cinema that motivated The Group was abandoned for the sake of a highly artisanal and radically innovative avant-garde mode of production.¹⁰ And quite similar chronologies have also been put forward in a pair of more recent, scholarly works devoted to avant-garde film in the 1960s: David E. James's *Allegories of Cinema* and Juan A. Suárez's *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars*. Though these authors' highly significant readings of the NAC vary in important respects, both James and Suárez perceive the NAC as an initial effort to establish an alternative cinema in the U.S. that flourished momentarily, failed abruptly, and was supplanted by a more explicitly counter-cultural film movement better designated "underground film."¹¹

If this narrative succeeds in addressing the significant shifts in mode of production, style, and cultural orientation that occurred in experimental film circles in the U.S. in the mid 1960s, it nevertheless restricts the notion "New American Cinema" to a small subset of filmic practices to which that designation has been applied since the late 1950s. In the critical and artistic discourse that emerged from the 1960s American avant-

⁹ Ibid 71-72.

¹⁰ See: "First Statement," op. cit.

¹¹ See: David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989) ch. 4; and Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1996) esp. 73-81.

garde itself, the heading “New American Cinema” was more fluid and its usage extended well past 1963. For instance, Gregory Battcock’s 1967 critical anthology devoted to the “extraordinary variety of artistically and sometimes technically amateurish ambitious productions that have recently attracted critical attention in New York City and elsewhere” is titled *The New American Cinema*.¹² Battcock liked this heading because he found it “sufficiently elastic” to cover the diverse range of tendencies that comprised then-contemporary independent American cinema.¹³ And this elasticity is attested to by the repeated employment of this heading over the course of the anthology to refer not only to the work of artists associated with The Group, but also to those more closely affiliated with the underground (Andy Warhol, Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, etc.), those typically associated with a more artisanal avant-garde (Stan Brakhage, Marie Menken, Storm De Hirsch, etc.), and even artists and works affiliated with the then-budding structural film movement (George Landow, Tony Conrad’s *The Flicker* [1966]).¹⁴

The heading “New American Cinema” was first employed by Mekas as a critical category to designate a rebellious spirit of improvisation and modernity that was beginning to make itself visible in independent American cinema of the late ‘50s, but which preceded the formation of The Group. Reflecting this early application, this heading eventually became detached from the artists who founded The Group to function as a more general designation of independent and avant-garde film practices based in the U.S. during the 1960s.¹⁵ Mekas’s own periodization speaks to this detachment. With the

¹² Gregory Battcock, “Introduction” in *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1967) 12.

¹³ Ibid 12.

¹⁴ Not all contributors to this volume used the heading “New American Cinema” in this expanded fashion. See, for instance, Amos Vogel, “Thirteen Confusions” in *The New American Cinema* esp. 127.

¹⁵ For early writings on the NAC see: Mekas, “New York Letter”; “A Call for a New Generation of Film-Makers” in *Film Culture Reader*; and “Cinema of the New Generation,” *Film Culture* 21 (Summer 1960).

publication of his 1972 book *Movie Journal*, which contains a selection of Mekas's "Movie Journal" columns composed for the *Village Voice* between 1959-1971, Mekas extended the NAC indefinitely by designating this period that of "The *Rise* of the New American Cinema."¹⁶

Yet without refusing periodization entirely, we can note that chronologies exceeding that employed by Sitney have been proposed by other significant works of critical and curatorial retrospection. Most notably, Melinda Ward and Bruce Jenkins chose 1967 as the concluding year of their traveling retrospective, *The American New Wave, 1958-1967*, which was co-produced by the Walker Art Center and Media Study/Buffalo in 1982. As Ward and Jenkins explain in their introduction to the catalogue for this retrospective, though the "first American independent cinema" (which they designate "The American New Wave") was initially comprised of the "array of dramatic, documentary and experimental filmmakers" associated with The Group, the activities of The Group are ultimately difficult to conceive outside the expanded terrain of independent filmmaking that developed in the U.S. in the 1960s, and which came to include artists who weren't directly affiliated with the Group such as Michael Roemer and Robert Young, Robert Downey, and George Kuchar.¹⁷ According to Ward's and Jenkins' chronology, this wave of independent cinema did not recede until its defining emphasis on realism and immediacy was simultaneously displaced from the helm of the

¹⁶ Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: MacMillan, 1972), emphasis added.

¹⁷ Melinda Ward and Bruce Jenkins, "Introduction" in *The American New Wave: 1958-1967*, ed. Ward (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1982) 2-3.

avant-garde by the rise of structural film and recuperated by the commercial cinema with the appearance of the New Hollywood.¹⁸

Though brief and patchy, this consideration of some prominent efforts to either periodize the NAC or prevent its periodization sufficiently demonstrates the remarkable volatility of this film culture's history and identity. In many ways, the NAC remains unhoused within contemporary film studies, floating in a liminal space between relatively fixed categories such as "independent film" and "avant-garde," and relegated to a sort of temporal vagrancy by which it has somehow come to represent both the naïve optimism evinced by "new wave" adherents in the early '60s, and the more radical formal innovations and countercultural rebellions enacted by the underground over the course of this decade. It is therefore not entirely surprising to find that the heading "New American Cinema" has recently been appropriated as an umbrella term for the range of economic, aesthetic, and ideological mutations that have manifested themselves in diverse branches of industrial and independent American cinema since 1980.¹⁹ While this sort of critical recycling reflects the historical imprecision of the heading "New American Cinema," it is also symptomatic of a broader reduction of the NAC's significance to film history by contemporary film scholarship.²⁰

The vagrancy of the concept "New American Cinema" cannot be blamed on the laziness or imprecision of film scholars, however. As is suggested by Kelman's above-

¹⁸ The significance of structural film and the New Hollywood to Ward and Jenkins's periodization can be inferred from this catalogue's "Chronology," esp. 73. For another, more recent work of scholarship that retains the heading "New American Cinema," see: Daniel Kane, We Saw the Light: Conversations between the New American Cinema and Poetry (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).

¹⁹ See Jon Lewis, ed., The New American Cinema (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1998).

²⁰ This tendency reaches its apogee with Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's factually inaccurate claim that North American film movements such as the NAC played a "relatively insignificant" role in the elaboration of the international network of "new cinemas" throughout the 1960s (Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Making Waves: New Cinemas of the 1960s [New York: Continuum, 2008] 14).

quoted statement against critical definition, the artists of the NAC actively strove to stave off stabilization to retain a sense of vitality. This investment in forging a living cinema was intentional, to be sure, emerging as it did out of a broader “culture of spontaneity” that flourished in the American arts of the postwar period.²¹ However, the ideology of spontaneity that simultaneously animated and imperiled the NAC was equally an outgrowth of necessity. As Paul Arthur has demonstrated in his invaluable analysis of this film culture, “Routines of Emancipation,” the NAC’s commitment to remaining “disorganizedly organized” (Mekas’s phrase) was “a tactic intended both to guarantee maximum personal freedom and to disguise the real fragility of the [independent film] network” that constituted the NAC.²² While the exceptional filmic works and enduring cultural institutions created by the NAC testifies to the shrewdness of this tactic, the commitment to disorganization that rendered this film culture possible has also contributed to its continuing obscurity. Though the NAC has received substantial critical recognition, the cultural discourse on which scholarship of the NAC is based is laden with inconsistencies, gaps, dissonances, and disavowals. It is a turbulent discourse, one that continues to make historiographic endeavors feel closer to vivisection than autopsy.

Rather than ironing out or systematizing the NAC’s discourse, this dissertation isolates one prominent through line that manifests itself in different variations in the writings, films, and life practices of a number of artists and critics affiliated with this film culture – a “line of sight” whose basic direction served to guide a set of otherwise distinct individuals affiliated with the NAC, providing them with a shared project or purpose.

²¹ Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998).

²² Paul Arthur, “Routines of Emancipation: Jonas Mekas and Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties” in *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005) 7.

Borrowing from Annette Michelson, I designate this project “redemptive” to convey this film culture’s investment in cinema as a restorative medium capable of salvaging “the human condition itself,” or rectifying the alienation permeating mass society at midcentury.²³ As I noted above, this redemptive project turned on a belief in cinema’s ability to restore a dwindling realm of inner experience being stifled by an impersonal late-modern world. Perceiving this world to be inhospitable to all forms of intimacy, this project defined the late-modern condition in terms of a pervasive *homelessness*. The individual was said to be lacking both a reliable shelter for interiority and a sense of belonging to his or her surrounding social environment, leaving him or her doubly homeless, devoid of both private enclosure and public recognition. The solution the NAC proposed entailed a two-fold movement: to mobilize film practice toward the redemption of “man’s soul” and then, with the inner intact, to begin the project of building a more truthful, moral, and intimate world.²⁴ Because the inner was imagined as a deep, timeless, and universal realm, it was believed to be capable of providing “an un-corrupt basis for... life,” or a starting point from which to create an alternative world.²⁵ Yet the timelessness of the inner also meant that the new world this film culture envisioned was a strangely familiar one. As Mekas once stated, the NAC’s efforts to render film responsive to “the deeper needs of man’s soul” stemmed from its desire to “bring [man] home.”²⁶

The NAC’s redemptive project was imbricated in a proliferation of artistic and critical discourses that emerged in postwar American culture around the problem of interiority, and which isolated the growing hostility to inner experience exhibited by mass

²³ Michelson, “Film and the Radical Aspiration” in *Film Culture Reader* 416.

²⁴ Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema” in *Film Culture Reader* 103.

²⁵ Mekas, “Cinema of the New Generation” 19.

²⁶ Mekas, “Where Are We—the Underground?” in *The New American Cinema* 20.

culture and mass society as one of the signal dilemmas of the postwar period. My dissertation situates the NAC within the context of such discourses to underscore its participation in a broader field of conversations about the disappearance of inner life in late modernity, though I also emphasize the peculiarity of its decision to combat this process through cinema. These conversations were not only being conducted in parallel avant-garde formations such as beat poetry, abstract expressionism, and jazz. As I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, anxieties surrounding the apparent “loss” or colonization of inner life can be discerned in other registers of American culture that would otherwise seem unrelated – even opposed – to the films of the NAC. These include popular forms of Hollywood cinema such as classical film noir and science fiction, and the more rigorous inquiries into the changing character of subjectivity put forward in diverse genres of postwar theory, such as sociology, experimental psychology, theories of the mass media, and political theory.

The NAC was thus not alone in its concern over the decline of inner life. In fact, its effort to create an intimate cinema capable of undoing the homogenizing effects of mass culture and mass society stands as a rather “late” iteration of the distinctly romantic revolt against social conformism that originated in the 18th century. According to Hannah Arendt, the Romanticists’ “rebellion of the heart” was intended to combat the “leveling demands” of an intrusive social realm defined by its tendency to invade and eradicate the innermost depths of intimate life – a realm whose emergence marked the very onset of modernity.²⁷ The NAC’s insistence on the renewed urgency of this intimate rebellion nearly two centuries after Romanticism should not be viewed as a merely nostalgic longing for a bygone artistic era. Nor should it be understood as a smooth inheritance of

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 39.

that era's central preoccupations or perspective.²⁸ Like other "romantic modernists" who emerged coextensive with the NAC, this film culture was endeavoring to "salvage the self from [the] supposedly decrepit, authoritarian culture" that developed in the U.S. after the onset of the cold war.²⁹ Its attempts to do so may have been grounded in blatantly "reactionary, if not retrograde, assumptions about identity."³⁰ Yet the NAC's voicing of such romantic assumptions from the position of 1960s American culture nevertheless indexes the remarkable intensification of conformism inaugurated by the rise of a distinctly late-modern configuration of mass society. Much like Arendt herself, artists of the NAC believed that, by the end of the 1950s, American mass society had nearly succeeded in its efforts to eradicate inner life. It was this historically-grounded anxiety that motivated their call for a film practice modeled after the opaque movements of poetry, one which could regain a deep, timeless interiority.

As is suggested by my emphasis on the NAC's redemptive claims, this dissertation locates the organizing principle of this film culture not in its efforts to reconfigure distribution or to promote an aesthetic of realism, but in its assertion that film be conceived as a radically personal medium. Yet "personal" here designates a concern with harnessing cinema's proximity to inner experience for the purpose of social change, rather than a purely individual pursuit of self-expression. This concern persists as a central preoccupation of this film culture from the moment of its emergence at the end of the 1950s through the many stylistic, economic, and cultural shifts it underwent over the course of the following decade. The Group's oft-cited assertion in their 1961 "First

²⁸ On American avant-garde film's relationship to "the heritage of Romanticism," see Sitney, Visionary Film xiii.

²⁹ Robert Genter, Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) 17.

³⁰ Ibid 17.

Statement” that “cinema is indivisibly a personal expression” can thus be found recurring as late as 1966 when, in the context of discussions regarding the establishment of an International Committee for New Cinema, Mekas and Clarke chose to characterize the NAC as an effort to remedy the “los[s]” or “hunger of the soul” suffered in American society, insisting that the inner was the most important register of social engagement for the American avant-garde.³¹ It is only through a sustained analysis of this investment in inner experience as a potentially transformative force that we can begin to understand the implications of the NAC’s filmic rebellion.

My dissertation embarks on such an analysis by arguing that, despite the NAC’s interest in the soul as an eternal and universal domain, this film culture’s anxiety about the “loss” of interiority was deeply enmeshed in the specific cultural and historical context of postwar American society. In my first chapter, “Turning Inwards,” I demonstrate this by placing the NAC’s statements about redemption in dialogue with a range of critical discourses that reveal the centrality of privacy, domesticity, and interiority to American politics of the postwar period. Though I draw on recent contributions to such disciplines as television studies, American studies, and architectural studies, I focus on Deborah Nelson’s recent analysis of the dramatic “privacy crisis” that erupted in American culture at the end of the 1950s, when privacy suddenly emerged as a “lost thing” at the very moment that containment ideology strove to reorganize democratic politics around the vigilant protection of the private realm.³² Extending Nelson’s analysis of this crisis, I revisit two prominent contributions to postwar political

³¹ “First Statement” 81; “What is the New Cinema? (Two Views—Paris and New York),” *Film Culture* 42 (Fall 1966): 60.

³² Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) xii, xiv.

theory by Arendt and Herbert Marcuse, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *One-Dimensional Man* respectively, which both define the central dilemma of this period in terms of a startling “destr[uction]” or “inva[sion]” of a previously private space of inner experience.³³ I argue for the importance of viewing the NAC’s redemptive project as an effort to harness cinema’s potential to repair the damage wrought on interiority by the impersonal character of postwar American mass culture and mass society, demonstrating how this redemptive orientation impacts this movement’s well-known innovations at the level of form and mode of production, as well as its attempts to conceive of cinema as a highly relational medium.

My second chapter, “Homeless Movies,” further contextualizes the NAC’s redemptive project by considering how the theme of homelessness that recurs throughout this movement’s collective *oeuvre* can be said to both expresses and respond to anxieties concerning the destabilization of traditional private and public realms that saturated American culture of the postwar period. Comparing the NAC’s fixation on homelessness with that evinced by an American film culture that immediately preceded the NAC’s emergence, classical film noir, I argue that the figures of homelessness we encounter in the NAC index this movement’s longing for stable domestic and social spheres in a manner remarkably similar to the nostalgic sentiments of noir. Yet I also show how artists of the NAC marked their difference from noir by seeking, in the manner of the Beats, to recuperate homelessness as an improvisatory, alternative lifestyle capable of rectifying postwar alienation by making new modalities of inwardness and belonging available to those who abandoned stable configurations of private and public life. I do so

³³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1966 ed. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1951) 475; Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1991) 10.

through close readings of three early works affiliated with the NAC: Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery* (1956), Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* (1959), and Jonas Mekas's *Guns of the Trees* (1961). As I argue, these three films encapsulate a spectrum of responses to the condition of postwar homelessness, variously casting this condition in a tragic, celebratory, or ambivalent light.

My third and final chapter, "Ron Rice, Vagabond," extends this discussion of homelessness through an analysis of the life and work of a single filmmaker, Ron Rice, paying particular attention to Rice's first feature, *The Flower Thief* (1960). I consider how Rice's pursuit of a life of rootlessness and marginality should be viewed as a paradoxical effort to locate or create something like home: a peaceful domain detached from the inhospitable environs of normative domestic and social spheres, and brimming with vitality and intimacy. This pursuit of an intimate home-space, I argue, is an exemplary instance of a complex, poetic impulse that structures the NAC's redemptive project. This impulse can be deemed "poetic" because it was oriented toward building a whole, alternative world. It speaks to this film culture's interest in mobilizing cinema's intimacy toward the creation of alternative cultural formations within which new relational and experiential modes could be reliably cultivated. Rice's life and films encapsulate both the productiveness and the futility of this poetic impulse. They illustrate the NAC's success in utilizing intimacy to generate unruly subcultural spheres. Yet they also reveal the fragility and ephemerality of all worldly formations mediated by intimacy.

In each of these three chapters, I focus on the NAC as an artistic development evocative of specific crises, conditions, and paradoxes that confronted cultural practices of the postwar period. I therefore intend this dissertation as a contribution to the

resurgence of scholarly interest in postwar American culture and the politics of the cold war. Yet I also conducted this analysis of the NAC with an eye on debates pertaining to developments in contemporary media cultures. Indeed, though the NAC's unabashed employment of such terms as "soul" or "spirit" when describing its redemptive project would appear to relegate it to a temporally distant realm, revealing its *Sixtiesness* and thus its historicity, the NAC's attempt to formulate a personal film practice capable of preserving interiority resonates with a pair of tendencies in contemporary media spheres in a manner that affords analyses of the NAC a distinct timeliness.

The first of these tendencies concerns the increasing significance of the personal with the rise of digital media. The digital's impressive promotion of personal media devices and its extensive commercialization of self-expression has given new meaning to Annette Michelson's assertion, in a 1966 lecture, that then-contemporary experimental home movie practices affiliated with the NAC were the most significant example of an artistic practice "aquiver with a sense of the future" (a phrase she borrows from André Breton).³⁴ Just as the NAC's jubilant embrace of portable 16mm and 8mm film cameras prefigured the ongoing explosion of mobile imaging technologies in contemporary media economies, the NAC's contribution to the development of personal film forms such as the diary film and the portrait film anticipated the growing pervasiveness of mediation and self-representation in our contemporary "confessional culture," where traditional distinctions between the private and the public, the everyday and the aesthetic, have been deeply and thoroughly problematized.

The second tendency concerns the anxieties such contemporary developments have provoked. When the NAC's complaints about the "loss" of the soul are viewed not

³⁴ Michelson, op. cit., 421.

simply as an index of this film culture's mysticism, but as expressions of unease over the absence of privacy in late modernity, these complaints appear far less dated or foreign. Mekas's repeated assertion throughout the late '50s and '60s that inner experience was being threatened by the deprivatizing logic of mass communications in fact stands as an early iteration of a central claim structuring postmodern media theory, in which the transparency and overexposure of contemporary media culture is said to signal nothing less than "the end of interiority and intimacy."³⁵ Whether in his diatribes against the "shadow-killing and all leveling California sun" (which he associated with Hollywood cinema), his critiques of the impersonal superficiality of "the public arts," or his protestations against the soul-crushing "machinery of bureaucracy, war, and mass communications," Mekas anticipated such postmodern complaints, whose continuing relevance to contemporary media studies stands as a testament to the surprising resilience of the postwar "privacy crisis" identified by Nelson.³⁶ As Nelson observes, this crisis has only intensified with the development of new and more sophisticated technologies of surveillance and confession over the last half century, creating an uncanny cultural condition in which "Privacy... is not simply dead. It is dying over and over and over again."³⁷

While the NAC prefigures postmodern theories of overexposure, this film culture also harbors a latent critique of such theories. What differentiates Mekas's anxieties

³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication" in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 1998) 153. For more on transparency and overexposure, see also: Baudrillard, The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena, tr. James Benedict (New York: Verso, 1993); Paul Virilio, The Vision Machine, tr. Julie Rose (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

³⁶ Mekas, "Cinema of the New Generation" 17; "New York Letter" 121; "Notes on the New American Cinema" 103.

³⁷ Nelson xi.

about the loss of privacy from those exhibited by contemporary critics of visual culture is the fact that Mekas's suspicions of the media motivated an extended effort to reclaim a visual media form for redemptive purposes. For artists of the NAC, film was invested with an ability to counter the withering of interiority in modern society – a view that would seem unthinkable from the perspective of postmodern media theory, where the superficial glare of the image has been deemed fundamentally incompatible with the deep, opaque workings of private life. Within the context of current debates on privacy and media, a return to the NAC reveals the need to rethink prevailing conceptions of the image. Like privacy itself, the image is too often equated with information by contemporary media theorists, a tendency that elides the continuing capacity of visual media to facilitate the production of “shadows... [where] we can cultivate forbidden virtues and forbidden beauties.”³⁸

³⁸ Mekas, Movie Journal 83.

CHAPTER ONE

TURNING INWARDS

I. The Redemptive Project of the New American Cinema

We have come to understand the New American Cinema (NAC) as much for its demands as for its failures and achievements. Perhaps the most familiar of these demands appears at the end of “The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group,” a collective manifesto issued by twenty-six individuals involved in the independent film scene in New York in the 1950s, who assembled in the fall of 1960 to form an independent film organization called “The Group.”³⁹ Written by Jonas Mekas in the summer of 1961, the “First Statement” was meant to synthesize the positions of the Group as a whole, which included artists such as Lionel Rogosin, Robert Frank, Alfred Leslie, Shirley Clarke, Gregory Markopoulos, and Edward Bland, as well as several producers and an attorney. The “First Statement” rallies against a host of economic, organizational, aesthetic, and legal issues that representatives of the NAC saw as inhibiting the formation of a sustainable, alternative network of film production and distribution in the United States: censorship laws, the lack of a domestic exhibition system for independent film, artistically constrictive aesthetic principles, and other such issues. However, it closes on a quite different note, one which reflects the NAC’s insistence that cinema be understood as a medium of “personal expression.”⁴⁰ “We are

³⁹ “The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group,” Film Culture Reader, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000) 79.

⁴⁰ Ibid 81.

for art,” the conclusion reads, “but not at the expense of life. We don’t want false, polished, slick films—we prefer them rough, unpolished, but alive; we don’t want rosy films—we want them the color of blood.”⁴¹ Framed as a rebellion against the “official cinema all over the world,” a designation meant to refer as much to the critically-acclaimed, international Art Cinemas as to Hollywood, both of which were seen to be “morally corrupt,” lacking in “sensitivity,” and otherwise “out of breath,” the NAC’s call for an unpolished film practice that could return a level of truth and vitality to the cinema reiterates one of the more striking assertions made earlier in the “First Statement”: that this movement’s primary motivation was not aesthetic or financial, but ethical.⁴² As the statement reads: “We are concerned with Man. We are concerned with what is happening to Man.”⁴³

This critique of the established cinema’s immorality points to an important aspect of the NAC’s representation of itself as a movement. Critics and historians frequently emphasize stylistic or material similarities linking the disparate filmmakers affiliated with the NAC, noting their adoption of a quasi-*vérité* shooting style, for instance, or their development of a pseudo-industrial mode of production.⁴⁴ However, the main spokespersons of this movement tended to cite a more ambitious task or project when seeking to define its organizing principle. Referred to variously as ethical, spiritual, or radical in nature, this project was predicated, as Annette Michelson has observed, “on a

⁴¹ Ibid 83.

⁴² Ibid 80.

⁴³ Ibid 81.

⁴⁴ See: Gregory Battcock, “Introduction” in The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology, ed. Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1967); Melinda Ward and Bruce Jenkins, “Introduction,” in The American New Wave, 1958-1967, ed. Ward (Buffalo, NY: Walker Art Center, 1982); David E. James, Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), esp. 85-87; and Juan A. Suárez, Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), esp. 73-81.

conception of film as being, in the very broadest sense, redemptive of the human condition itself.”⁴⁵ Hence, the critic Ken Kelman’s influential definition of the NAC as a “spiritual medium... [whose] primary drive is to replenish the human spirit which has been eroded as much as our earth has been by ‘progress,’” and Mekas’s repeated insistence that the NAC’s filmic rebellion was a sign of these artists’ participation in a broader “ethical movement” sweeping through American culture of the postwar period – a movement oriented toward saving the human soul.⁴⁶

At the heart of the NAC’s redemptive project, there is a basic claim about the depthlessness of American cultural production at midcentury, with the cinema in particular standing as one of the primary indices of mass culture’s hostility to interiority. As the NAC’s indictment of the immoral and constrictive character of the “Product Film[s]” being engineered by the commercial film industry suggests, this movement’s aesthetic rebellion, its attempt to cultivate a more personal mode of film practice rooted in creative expression and improvisation, centers on a conviction that the impersonal forces of mechanization and standardization underlying late-modern American society were being reproduced at the level of artistic practice through a forced adherence to the mandates of classical aesthetics and the artificial benchmarks of professional quality established by Hollywood.⁴⁷ Within this context, the negative dimension of the NAC’s rebellion – this movement’s modest attempt, as Mekas writes elsewhere, to enact “a *complete* derangement of the official cinematic senses,” break free from the stifling

⁴⁵ Annette Michelson, “Film and the Radical Aspiration,” in Film Culture Reader, 416.

⁴⁶ Ken Kelman, “Anticipations of the Light,” in The New American Cinema, 24; Mekas, “Cinema of the New Generation” 19. See also: Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema,” in Film Culture Reader, 103-107; “First Statement,” 81; and Mekas, “Movie Journal,” Village Voice, March 30, 1960, 16.

⁴⁷ “First Statement” 80. On the “private” dimension of the New American Cinema’s film practice, see Jonas Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema,” Film Culture Reader, 93; and Mekas, Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 199-201.

“molds of Western culture,” and overturn “the entire landscape of human thought, as it is accepted publicly in the Western world” – was felt to go hand in hand with a more productive or reparative work, one that was framed as an attempt to restore or replenish a dwindling realm of inner experience.⁴⁸ The redemptive project of the NAC thus stemmed from a basic wager: that cinema, despite its perceived midcentury exhaustion, could be the site of a profound investment; that the filmic medium was uniquely capable of returning some vestige of intimacy and vitality to the increasingly superficial terrain of the late-modern world.

The NAC’s redemptive claims have provoked a significant level of critical unease within the discipline of film studies, where this movement’s redemptive project has been framed largely as a problematic dimension of this film culture, one that was severely out of step with the radical socio-political movements that would come to redefine American society over the course of the 1960s.⁴⁹ The two most significant scholarly engagements with the NAC appear in David E. James’s study of 1960s American film, *Allegories of Cinema*, and Juan A. Suárez’s analysis of the gay sensibility structuring American avant-garde film of this period, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars*. It is important to note, however, that each of these considerations of the NAC occur in the course of studies that are concerned primarily with the political dynamic of the “underground” film movement

⁴⁸ Mekas, “A Call for a New Generation of Film-Makers,” *Film Culture Reader*, 75. See also: Mekas, *Movie Journal* 1.

⁴⁹ For film critics writing during the 1960s, the NAC’s attempt to justify its anarchical abandonment of formal and aesthetic criteria on moral or spiritual grounds were often perceived as misguided, irresponsible, and apolitical. See for instance the collection of essays published under the heading “Critique of the new American cinema” in *Film Culture* 24 (Spring 1962), especially Edouard de Laurot, “The Future of the New American Cinema,” and de Laurot, et al, “Glossary of the New American Cinema.” For related criticisms, see: Parker Tyler, “Is Film Criticism Only Propaganda” in *The New American Cinema*; Amos Vogel, “Thirteen Confusions” in *The New American Cinema*; Michelson, op. cit; and Louis Marcorelles’s statements in “What is the New Cinema? (Two Views—Paris and New York),” *Film Culture* 42 (Fall 1966).

that James and Suárez position as the NAC's immediate successor. For these scholars, underground film is framed as a more explicitly countercultural filmic avant-garde that came into its own after the NAC's brief flourishing and dispersal in the early 1960s.⁵⁰ Though the heading "new American cinema" was used somewhat interchangeably with other designations such as "underground," "independent," "personal film," or "new wave" throughout the '50s and '60s, James and Suárez conceive the NAC and the underground as distinct moments in American avant-garde film history, situating these formations on either side of an historical division that they also articulate in political terms. While these scholars' readings of the NAC differ in many respects, they each argue that this movement's redemptive claims – its concern with morality or interiority – reveal the NAC not only as an historical predecessor of underground film, but as a relatively conservative predecessor from which a more radical underground film movement departed. In contemporary scholarship on the American avant-garde, the politics of the NAC have thus come to be defined, necessarily, *against* those of the underground: the NAC appears as the "not-radical" or "less radical" precursor to underground film.

For James, who criticizes the NAC's effort to "[reform]" Hollywood's industrial model of film practice while leaving this model's basic principles of "professional production and public consumption" intact, the NAC's attempt to create a quasi-industrial film practice that would be "more serious, honest, mature, or responsible" than that of Hollywood is said to have been directly opposed to the anti-political and anti-industrial "social energy of the period."⁵¹ In James's framework, it wasn't until a more directly

⁵⁰ See: James ch. 4, esp. 85-100; Suárez ch. 2, esp. 73-86.

⁵¹ James 87.

countercultural movement of underground filmmakers “joyfully rejected” the ethical and industrial premises of the NAC that a truly radical alternative film culture was able to develop in America, one that succeeded in “open[ing] out the entire practice of cinema as a sphere of countercultural activity.”⁵² Suárez, on the other hand, frames the NAC’s emergence primarily through a discussion of its stylistic influences and affiliates this movement’s rebellion against the mainstream with a retrograde, residual modernism, one that developed in the U.S. after WWII as a response to an emergent, postmodern cultural formation. Positioning the currency and radicality of 1960s cultural expressions in terms of their willingness to engage the terrain of mass culture, Suárez reads the NAC’s concern with the integrity of the “inner self” and the “human spirit,” and its opposition to the standardization of commercial cinema, as a reactionary response akin to high modernism’s historical “withdr[awal] into the realm of autonomous aesthetics.”⁵³

Despite the differences of these two readings, James and Suárez both frame the NAC’s dissolution and replacement by underground cinema as a result of the NAC’s pronounced detachment from the defining energy or sensibility of its cultural present. The NAC appears in these studies as a distinctly non-synchronous cultural formation, one divorced from its historical moment due either to its failure to relinquish its old-fashioned moral seriousness, or to its belated rehearsal of an outmoded ideology of interiority. The redemptive project of the NAC is thus perceived, paradoxically, to undercut the very claims to newness and immediacy that drive this project. And similarly, both James and Suárez understand the NAC’s oppositional stance to be problematized by its redemptive burden, either because this burden requires the NAC to address itself to a general

⁵² James 87, 99.

⁵³ Suárez 84, 96, 78, xiii. In his more recent book, Suárez explores a different side of modernism. See his Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2007).

populace through a public mode of exhibition, or because the NAC's concern with the spirit encourages it to retreat into an autonomous, eternal aesthetic realm.

Though these characterizations of the NAC are by no means unfounded, James's and Suárez's shared perception of the NAC as an *arrière-garde* formation that was out of sync with the defining cultural and political energy of its historical context is complicated by recent scholarship that illustrates the centrality of privacy to American politics of the post-WWII period. In particular, new studies devoted to the politicization of privacy and domesticity during the cold war reveal the need to reconsider lingering perceptions of the NAC as a detached or disengaged cultural formation. With the aid of recent cultural histories of the postwar U.S. and the resurgence of interest in American political discourse during the cold war, we can gain an alternative critical framework through which to view the redemptive claims of the NAC, one that allows us to perceive this movement's defining statements and artistic practices in their specific historical context, rather than as precedents of underground film.

In this chapter, I construct such a framework by situating the emergence of the NAC's redemptive project in relation to what the literary scholar Deborah Nelson has recently identified as the widespread "privacy crisis" that took shape in postwar American society as a result of a range of social, political, and cultural developments affiliated with the cold war.⁵⁴ As Nelson shows, the rise of the cold war's governing "containment culture" simultaneously threatened and bolstered a lingering national investment in the private sphere as an autonomous and impervious space of protective enclosure, one most frequently identified with the privileged symbol of capitalist

⁵⁴ Deborah Nelson, Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) xii.

democracy: the private home. Seeking to both expand on and modify Nelson's discussion of this crisis, I consider a range of socio-cultural phenomena from the postwar era that contributed to growing anxieties about the vulnerability and instability of privacy within the context of the cold war. I then trace out an alternative set of responses to this destabilization of privacy articulated within theoretical analyses of mass society and mass culture put forward in the late '50s and '60s by Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse. As I argue, while these analyses are concerned with protecting or preserving a realm of privacy, this concern nevertheless diverges from dominant iterations of the politics of privacy in cold war culture. As in the critical discourse produced by the NAC, Arendt's and Marcuse's writings from this period isolate mass society's increasing hostility to interiority as a signal dilemma of the late-modern era. Though these theorists do exhibit considerable anxiety about the "death" of privacy, they do not locate the meaning of privacy in a normative domestic realm whose security testifies to the vitality of American democracy. Rather, privacy is conceived as a subjective mode or register that provides the condition of possibility for inner experience, where the latter is aligned with the mental processes of the mind as well as the affective impulses of the soul. The apparent "loss" of this subjective mode thus motivates far-reaching critiques of the thoughtlessness and dehumanization attaining in mass society.

One of the primary arguments of this chapter is that the redemptive project of the NAC must be understood as an artistic analogue of these theoretical efforts to elaborate alternative conceptions of privacy from within an American cultural regime devoted to maintaining the private as a singular and coherent notion. As I demonstrate, though the NAC's critical and artistic statements do register or participate in the postwar privacy

crisis, they also respond to and reframe this crisis in crucial ways. On the one hand, artists of the NAC frame American society's progressive eradication of all forms of depth and interiority as one of the most threatening tendencies of the late-modern era. On the other hand, however, they also insist on cinema's ability to counter this process by producing new forms or dispositions of inner experience. For representatives of the NAC, cinema's spontaneity afforded it a unique capacity to reanimate a latent realm of interiority, one whose chaotic impulses were conceived in direct opposition to the excessive rationality of late modernity. By creating films modeled on the "wildness" of inner experience, and projecting these films to a public audience, the NAC hoped to employ cinema as a medium capable of generating new spaces of intimate encounter in which a vital feeling of inwardness could be regained. The "inward turn" that defined this movement's practices at the level of production thus entailed a corresponding outward orientation, an effort to impact and reconfigure the material and spiritual composition of the viewer. The NAC's redemptive project hinged on the creative repurposing of a seemingly lifeless cinematic apparatus as a distinctly intimate technology, one generative of new modes of being-in-depth immune to the leveling force of mass society and mass culture.

Though this chapter considers the development of this view of cinema primarily through a detailed examination of the critical writings of Jonas Mekas and other spokespersons of the NAC, I conclude by discussing how the this movement's redemptive project also impacted its films at the level of both form and content. I do so by arguing that the NAC's oft-discussed elaboration of a "spontaneous" or "immediate" filmic grammar must be understood as an extension of its investment in interiority, and

by demonstrating how this investment also motivates the NAC's recurrent depictions of subcultural artistic practices mediated by intimacy. Paying particular attention to a set of films that draw on the affective resonances of then-contemporary musical forms such as folk and jazz in an effort to develop a radically "direct" or "unmediated" relationship with the viewer, I conclude by analyzing the political and conceptual stakes of this movement's pursuit of intimacy, examining the representational practices that this pursuit motivated as well as its theoretical limitations.

II. The Postwar Privacy Crisis

As numerous historians have observed, the period following the end of World War II brought a series of rapid and far-reaching cultural, economic, technological, and political transformations to American life that were articulated across the nation's social fabric at a variety of different levels, fundamentally affecting the modes of transportation, habitation, leisure, labor, communication, and individual consumption that structured everyday life for the majority of Americans during the 1950s, and significantly altering the already-tenuous dynamic of prevailing social hierarchies that had been thrown into disrepair by the exceptional demands of the nation's wartime economy.⁵⁵ The major developments structuring this process of transformation are relatively well known. Amidst a national housing crisis, federally subsidized private housing construction grew to an unprecedented degree, and masses of young, white Americans moved out of

⁵⁵ See, for instance: William Henry Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003); Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in America* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000) esp. chs. 3-5; Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1880-2000* (New York: Pantheon, 2003) esp. ch. 7.

crowded urban centers and into a budding suburbia, which – with the aid of government subsidies encouraging workers to aspire to middle-class status – became the mingling ground of a new “mass middle class” and the emblem of American social equality, though it also established a material topography of racial segregation between the nation’s largely all-white suburban clusters and the Northern and Western cities that African Americans increasingly came to populate throughout the 40s and 50s.⁵⁶ While suburban housing developments spurred the construction of new highway systems, the middle-class home quickly became the motor of a growing mass consumption economy founded on ideals of affluence, comfort, and excess as growing numbers of homeowners purchased automobiles and filled their houses with modern domestic appliances like refrigerators, washers and dryers, blenders, dishwashers, and televisions, the latter of which found their way into nearly 90 percent of American homes by the end of the 1950s. Meanwhile, as veterans struggled to forget the traumas and anxieties of warfare by attempting to reinsert themselves into the fractured family unit and accustom themselves to the increasingly bureaucratized, white-collar American workforce, women who had previously entered spheres of paid labor during wartime were now asked to resume more traditional roles as homemakers in the name of a national return to family values.

As these examples indicate, despite the breadth and scope of these transformations, the shifts and transitions subtending daily life in American society after WWII were largely framed and perceived as part of a broader project of national restabilization and reunification. As Vivian Sobchack pointedly observes in a recent essay on American film noir of the postwar period, “the decade immediately following

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the class divisions that persisted despite claims regarding the emergence, in postwar America, of something resembling a “classless society,” see: Cohen 152-65 and ch. 5.

World War II [in U.S. history]... is marked as ‘transitional,’ and its overarching themes are the recovery of a lost patriarchal order and the need for the country to literally and metaphorically ‘settle down.’”⁵⁷

As Sobchack’s language here suggests, the postwar era’s drive toward national restabilization was primarily played out in relation to the middle-class home, whose claims to security, stability, intimacy, and legibility transformed this material site or space into a highly overdetermined symbol of national unity and phenomenological plenitude during this period of transition. As now-canonical studies of postwar domesticity such as Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound* have shown, during this era, the home took on a therapeutic and protective function within the context of an American social universe suddenly felt to be lacking in coherence and unity, and a political environment permeated by the threat of nuclear annihilation.⁵⁸ Paradoxically, however, as more recent inquiries into the postwar period by critics and historians such as Lynn Spigel, Beatriz Colomina, and Lizabeth Cohen have detailed, this intense national investment in the sanctity and autonomy of domestic life and the middle-class home emerged coextensive with a profound destabilization of the rigid, material boundary traditionally held to separate the public from the private sphere. According to Spigel, this destabilization must be counted as a “central dilemma” of the postwar era.⁵⁹ Indeed, with the aid recent scholarship on American society in the 1940s and 50s, it has become

⁵⁷ Vivian Sobchack, “Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir,” Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998) 130-31.

⁵⁸ Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

⁵⁹ Lynn Spigel, Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001) 1. See also: Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Colomina. Domesticity at War (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); and Cohen, esp. ch. 3.

increasingly clear that the tensions and volatility of the postwar era were registered nowhere more acutely than in cultural conceptions and configurations of domesticity and the private sphere.

Even before the famous refutation of prevailing distinctions between the personal and the political that took shape in the 1960s, this destabilization of the private sphere can be identified through an analysis of what we, borrowing from Colomina, might term a twin “publiciz[ation]” of domesticity, the suburban household, and private life more generally in American culture after WWII.⁶⁰ This process of publicization can be discerned first of all in the widespread turn in domestic architecture, interior design, and domestic practices of the 50s toward what Spigel has referred to as the home’s reconfiguration as a highly permeable “space for looking” or “vehicle for [imaginative] transport” defined by a heightened interrelation between the inside and the outside world.⁶¹ As Spigel argues in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, this reconfiguration comes through most clearly in the postwar suburban household’s incorporation of modernist architectural ideals (open floor plans, an unprecedented use of large plate-glass windows, etc.) that sought to blur distinctions between public and private spaces as a way of mediating between the “dual goals of separation from and integration into the outside world” that motivated the nation’s embrace of suburban living during this period.⁶² But amidst this turn toward spatial ambiguity, Spigel explains, the television quickly became the perfect addition to the suburban home because of its ability to provide virtual access

⁶⁰ Beatriz Colomina, “Introduction: Cold War Hothouses,” *Cold War Hothouses*, eds. Colomina, Annmarie Brennan, and Jeannie Kim (New York: Princeton Architectural, 2004) 14.

⁶¹ Spigel, *Dreamhouse* 2.

⁶² Ibid 32.

to public events and faraway places through otherwise private acts of gazing.⁶³ Though television was frequently advertised during this era as a means of maintaining familial bonds and reinforcing the subtle architecture of patriarchal domesticity, television's entrance into the domestic sphere further dissolved the boundaries between the structured, homogeneous space-time of the domestic universe and the punctual, unpredictable rhythms of public life.⁶⁴ Though this blurring had already been accomplished to a certain degree by earlier architectural trends and domestic technologies like radio, as Spigel argues, television's popularization during the 1950s represented an historically new "spectac[ularization]" of the domestic environment.⁶⁵

A second tendency toward publicization concerned the production of American domesticity itself as an object of intra- and international ocular fascination by a growing American culture industry mobilized toward the manufacture and distribution of images of the "American way of life." As has been documented most extensively by Colomina, throughout the 1950s – a decade that, she argues, witnessed the image's rise to dominance as the primary architectural substance structuring/subtending daily life in the western world – the middle-class American home was fervently transformed into both an advertising product and a "propaganda device" by an impressive, emergent apparatus of American mass-mediated publicity that mobilized "expertly designed images of domestic bliss" in magazines, advertisements, and television programs to bolster a growing mass consumption economy and contribute to national and international perceptions of

⁶³ Ibid 32-33.

⁶⁴ See Spigel's discussion of TV's simultaneous disruption and reinforcement of family "togetherness" and domestic space in "Television in the Family Circle: The Popular Reception of a New Medium," Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1990).

⁶⁵ Spigel, Dreamhouse 2.

American affluence as a symbol of democratic liberty.⁶⁶ As Colomina puts it: “The suburban house, equipped with every imaginable appliance, projected the image of the ‘Good Life,’ of the lifestyle of prosperity and excess that was the main weapon in the Cold War.”⁶⁷ That the middle-class home was able to function as a “weapon” in America’s fight against communism was perceived early on by Senator Joseph McCarthy, who worked throughout the late 1940s to see that federal aid allocated to counteract the housing shortage would go to the construction of communities of single-family homes by large private builders, instead of multi-family public housing units which McCarthy considered “breeding ground[s] for communists” – a sentiment that would later be reiterated by one of McCarthy’s affiliates, William Levitt, who famously asserted that “No man who has a house and lot can be a communist.”⁶⁸ But the remarkable collapsing of the national and the ideological into the space of the home evidenced by this politicization of domestic life became most glaringly apparent – of course – during the 1959 “Kitchen Debates” between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, where Nixon scored one of his most memorable political victories by extolling the relative merits of washing machines over missiles, and asserting that everyday domestic appliances wrested from the free market by private consumers constituted the essence of American freedom. As the remarkable impact that photographs of this debate had on both American and global perceptions of capitalist democracy suggests, in the postwar era, middle-class American domesticity was both defined through mass-mediated forms of visual representation and made to function as the central symbol of democratic freedom for audiences within the U.S. and abroad.

⁶⁶ Colomina, *Domesticity at War* 12, 7.

⁶⁷ Colomina, “Introduction: Cold War Hothouses” 16.

⁶⁸ Hayden 130-31, 135.

These transformations to domestic architecture and technologies, as well as to practices of representing the American home, were paralleled by a somewhat more basic alteration of the function and configuration of the private sphere in American society during this era. As Lizabeth Cohen argues in her remarkable analysis of the politics of postwar consumption, *A Consumers' Republic*, a “fundamental shift” took shape in American economic, political, and cultural life after WWII that radically disturbed previously operative divisions in American life between private spheres of consumerism and the public realm of political practice.⁶⁹ With the end of WWII and the development of a national and political economy of reconversion and containment, Cohen demonstrates, there emerged a new emphasis in diverse strata of American society on mass consumption as both a pathway to national recovery and a testament to the superiority of capitalist democracy over the evils of communism. Cohen finds this emphasis operating in everything from advertisements and photo-essays in popular magazines like *Life* and *Bride* to new federal support programs like the Employment Act of 1946 and the G.I. Bill, “sponsored films” produced by nonprofits and private corporations, and more basic changes in individual consumers’ perceptions of the relationship existing between the market and individual freedom.⁷⁰

According to Cohen, the emergence of this “Consumers’ Republic,” in which consumerism became inseparable from democratic ideology, created a new ideal of the American consumer that Cohen dubs the “purchaser as citizen,” which is to be distinguished from the two competing models of consumership that held sway in the U.S. during WWII:

⁶⁹ Cohen 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid 112-29.

Out of the wartime conflict between citizen consumers, who reoriented their personal consumption to serve the general good, and purchaser consumers, who pursued private gain regardless of it, emerged a new postwar ideal of the purchaser as citizen who simultaneously fulfilled personal desire and civic obligation by consuming... Wherever one looked in the aftermath of war, one found a vision of postwar America where the general good would be best served not by frugality or even moderation, but by individuals pursuing personal wants in a flourishing mass consumption marketplace.⁷¹

What this mutual imbrication of the general/civic and the individual/personal after WWII demonstrates is that, in postwar American society, previously independent realms of private consumption and public responsibility became indistinguishable as both the nation's fate and the broader project of capitalist democracy were suddenly found to hinge on the practices of individual purchasers, whose personal acts of consumption were now redefined as acts of patriotic duty. In Cohen's schema, the "fundamental shift" inaugurated by the appearance of the Consumers' Republic in postwar America entailed an extensive, systematic blurring of distinctions between public and private spheres not only in the national imaginary, but in the material structure of economic, political, and cultural institutions as well as the everyday practices of individual citizens. Within the Consumers' Republic, private possessions and the values attached to them – particularly the virtues and morals housed by the suburban home, which, according to Cohen, functioned as the very "bedrock" of the postwar mass consumption economy – no longer belonged to individuals or the nuclear family, but to what Arendt once referred to as the more amorphous "facsimile of one super-human family" that is the nation.⁷²

As these analyses reveal, dominant conceptions of privacy and domesticity during the postwar era were riddled with internal contradictions. Despite popular conceptions of

⁷¹ Ibid 119-21.

⁷² Ibid 122; Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 29.

the home as a private haven or a protective enclosure from the pressures of working life and the impending threat of the bomb, the private sphere was itself run through and defined by the workings of capitalist exchange and the ideological principles of the free market, just as everyday domestic activities were permeated by uncanny traces of warfare, which haunted newly popular push-button technologies and the panoptic layout of domestic interiors.⁷³ Alongside this commercialization and militarization of the private sphere, domesticity became overtly politicized through its thorough colonization by a national propaganda apparatus geared toward the maintenance and intensification of distinctly anti-communist national sentiments. And at a more quotidian level, the extensive reorganization of the household and domestic life undertaken in the name of family unity and personal security during this era made the home increasingly vulnerable to various forces of invasion, contamination, disturbance, and familial discord.⁷⁴ Paradoxically, then, although the postwar era lives on in national memory as a period organized by centripetal social forces, the intensified policing of borders, and a highly nostalgic attempt to preserve and protect the stability of family life and the private sphere, the dominant models of privacy and domesticity holding sway during this era significantly undermined conceptions of the private as an autonomous realm untouched by the operations of the workplace, society, or the state.

These tensions and contradictions did not go unnoticed. As Deborah Nelson has shown in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, with the onset of the cold war and its governing project of containment, which depended so heavily on the maintenance of strict borders and demarcations, the increasingly blurred distinction between public and

⁷³ Colomina, "Introduction: Cold War Hothouses" 14, 16-17.

⁷⁴ See, for instance: Spigel, *Dreamhouse* 38-39; Spigel, "Television in the Family Circle," esp. 80-89.

private realms generated a host of cultural anxieties that reached beyond the realm of philosophical discourse to become a much more pervasive aspect of midcentury American culture.⁷⁵ Because cold war rhetoric generally perceived the sanctity and autonomy of the private sphere as “the most significant point of contrast between [democracies and totalitarian regimes],” Nelson argues, the anxieties generated by the breakdown of the public/private divide manifested themselves in the form of an extensive “crisis” of privacy, what Nelson terms “the stunning emergence of privacy as a ‘lost thing’ at the end of the 1950s.”⁷⁶ As Nelson shows, the cold war’s privacy crisis spread through an “astonishing variety of locations” from the late 50s to the early 70s including popular journalism, medical discourse, law enforcement, and diverse spheres of cultural production, and drew from a range of technological, social, and cultural developments to designate multitudinous “invasions” into private life, from wiretaps and the proliferation of new surveillance devices to the institution of personality testing by employers and the increased dependency on data gathering by corporations, educational systems, and government agencies like the IRS, the CIA, and the NSA.⁷⁷ And at the same time, there emerged an entire “culture of confession” within postwar American society, whose members and affiliates were characterized most directly by their willingness to open the whole sphere of intimacy and private experience to public exposure, “both for pleasure and in protest.”⁷⁸ Best represented by the growth of “confessional poetry” at the end of the 1950s typified by the indecorous writing of authors such as Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, this culture of confession constituted the “mirror side of the

⁷⁵ Nelson xi-xv.

⁷⁶ Ibid xiii, xiv.

⁷⁷ Ibid 9-11. For the most detailed analysis of these invasions to emerge during the 1960s, see Vance Packard, *The Naked Society* (New York: McKay, 1962).

⁷⁸ Nelson 19, xv.

‘death of privacy’ debate”: a shift toward a modern culture of self-disclosure, and a loosening of socio-cultural taboos against the exposure or confession of private experience, which provoked new fears regarding the growing indifference displayed by modern Americans toward invasions of privacy.⁷⁹

Discussing the ways in which containment ideology “scripted” this privacy crisis, or “provided a language and a narrative to the dilemma of privacy in modernity more generally,” Nelson explains that, in the political context of the cold war, the twin developments of increased invasion and self-disclosure were often said to signal the “end” or “death” of privacy, and by extension, the end of American democracy.⁸⁰ As she writes:

The potency of American democracy in cold war rhetoric was... not its cultivation of a vibrant and free public discourse but its vigilant protection of private autonomy. Moreover, the stakes of this conviction were typically apocalyptic: either we preserved the integrity of private spaces and thus the free world, or we tolerated their penetration and took the first step toward totalitarian oppression.⁸¹

Despite such apocalyptic, binarized rhetoric, however, the explosion of inquiries into the status of privacy at the end of the 1950s should not be read, Nelson explains, as signaling the disappearance of this realm of experience. Rather, this explosion indicates privacy’s “sudden visibility,” or the specific moment in American history when “privacy emerged as a central term in a vast social debate about the dilemmas of modern citizenship.”⁸²

Contesting the notion that there has ever been anything like a singular and universal, or non-exclusionary and non-privative form of privacy, Nelson suggests we view the onset of this crisis as marking the breakdown of a particular, dominant fiction of privacy, what

⁷⁹ Ibid 19, 11.

⁸⁰ Ibid xii.

⁸¹ Ibid xiii.

⁸² Ibid xii.

she refers to here as “patriarchal privacy,” or notions of privacy as an autonomous realm of individual freedom and relief from public scrutiny that is organized and made legible through the maintenance of traditional gender hierarchies.⁸³

Despite the fictional character of this conception of privacy, its breakdown nevertheless functioned as a central impetus in highly divergent manifestations of postwar American culture, though one whose significance has been severely underestimated in cultural histories of this period. While Nelson’s elucidates the ways in which this breakdown impacted constitutional law and American literature throughout the 1950s and 60s, we can also extend Nelson’s analysis by pointing to other representations of this crisis in postwar culture, and particularly in the cinema. One particularly sinister manifestation of anxieties surrounding the loss of privacy can be seen in the dramatization of scenes of bodily possession and home intrusion in postwar science fiction films like *Them!* (1954), *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and *The Blob* (1958), whose fantastical depictions of alien invasions and monstrous mutations have frequently been discussed as coded expressions of communist threats.⁸⁴ Similar anxieties also figure in works of the American avant-garde culture that preceded the NAC, perhaps most recognizably in Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), which film scholars like Lauren Rabinovitz and Dana Polan have intriguingly framed as a reworking of conventional representations of women and patriarchal domesticity in 1940s Hollywood genres such as noir and the melodrama.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid xiii.

⁸⁴ On the relationship between American science fiction films and the cold war, see for instance: Victoria O’Donnel, “Science Fiction Films and Cold War Anxiety” in *Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959*, ed. Peter Lev (New York: Thomson/Gale, 2003); and David Seed, *American Science Fiction Film and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁸⁵ Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 55-65; Dana Polan, *Power and*

However, as I show in more detail in the next chapter, uncertainty surrounding the “loss” of traditional conceptions of privacy also register in a far more concrete way in both classical noir and the films of the NAC itself. While noir has emerged in recent film scholarship as the dominant cinematic genre in which the “new American homelessness” of the postwar period gained expression, the postwar privacy crisis also impacted the NAC to a considerable extent, helping to shape this film movement’s obsessive preoccupation with the absence of traditional home-spaces and the potential for their recovery.⁸⁶

To read such film practices as responses to the crisis of privacy outlined by Nelson, it is necessary to push back our understanding of this dilemma’s historical appearance in order to account for the ways that privacy’s perceived vulnerability during the postwar era contributed to the emergence of cultural formations and expressions like classical noir and early sci-fi that precede the explosion of discourse on the “death” of privacy at the end of the 1950s. Conceiving the NAC in particular as a representation of this crisis also demands that we modify one important aspect of Nelson’s analysis. Despite her continued emphasis on the “elastic” and “protean” character of privacy in late-modern American society, Nelson’s discussion of the manner in which cultural fears regarding the dissolution of the private sphere were articulated in the context of the cold war retains a peculiar rigidity.⁸⁷ While Nelson shows that these concerns motivated and informed the work of a highly diverse set of intellectuals, cultural critics, legal theorists, artists, politicians, and social, cultural, and governmental organizations, she nevertheless

Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940-1950 (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 10-11.

⁸⁶ Sobchack 146.

⁸⁷ Nelson xix, xiv.

endeavors to group such organizations and figures together as variations on a common theme: the expression of a “nostalgic” and politically suspect lamentation over the passing of a fundamentally “elite and patriarchal” cultural ideal, the pursuit and promotion of which was, by the end of the 1950s, simply no longer tenable or justifiable from a liberal standpoint.⁸⁸ In an important passage that speaks to this tendency, Nelson argues:

if privacy was supposed to symbolize the autonomy, freedom, self-determination, and repose that the citizen of a democracy most valued, it became increasingly evident in the confessional writing of the period that privacy could also represent isolation, loneliness, domination, and routine. Moreover, it was newly obvious that these deprivations of privacy were unevenly distributed; categories of citizens – women or homosexuals – rather than unlucky individuals were banished to the deprivation, rather than the liberation, of privacy. This ambivalence suggests that the sudden visibility of privacy fractured it. Therefore, what got ‘lost’ at the end of the 1950s was a certain fantasy of privacy as a stable and self-evident concept, ‘privacy as we have always known it,’ in the common parlance of the era.⁸⁹

While Nelson’s rejection of the false claims to universality and liberation underlying attempts to preserve “patriarchal privacy” during this era is indispensable, in establishing this division between the range of nostalgic and fundamentally conservative figures mourning the breakdown of “privacy as we have always known it” in postwar American society, and those more politically progressive confessional poets committed to revealing privacy’s restrictiveness and celebrating its death through pleasurable acts of self-disclosure, Nelson overlooks the fact that “patriarchal privacy” was not the only version of the private being analyzed and valorized within the context of the cold war. In doing so, she is also unable to consider the ways in which a range of left-leaning political theorists, artists, and cultural critics sought to combat the specific forms of domination,

⁸⁸ Ibid xiii.

⁸⁹ Ibid xiii.

isolation, and exploitation subtending postwar American society not by rejecting the violence and exclusions underlying capitalist democracy's investment in the private sphere, but by working to formulate, explore, and regain a version of privacy rooted in claims to inner experience.

This oversight comes through most clearly in Nelson's attempt to group Arendt's writings on privacy in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) together with the "welter of anxious musing on the death of privacy" circulating through American popular culture after the war.⁹⁰ Drawing on one of Arendt's concluding arguments in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which asserts that the historical innovation of totalitarian modes of governance comes through totalitarianism's complete penetration and destruction of the private realm of life, Nelson suggests that this claim, along with Arendt's statement that "the most essential political criterion for judging events of our time [is]: will it lead to totalitarian rule or will it not?," is representative of the cold war's aforementioned, apocalyptic tendency to position the private sphere as the ultimate litmus test of the health of American freedom and democracy.⁹¹ This suggestion is ultimately problematic, and not only because of Arendt's insistence that true freedom can never be found in private but only and exclusively in the political realm.⁹² Even more importantly, Arendt's discovery of totalitarianism's unique purchase on the private sphere was only made possible, as Arendt herself explains in the Preface to the 1966 edition, by her attainment of "certain insights of a strictly theoretical nature" between the time of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*'s original appearance in 1951 and her publication of a second paperback edition in 1958 (in which the concluding chapter on "Ideology and Terror" quoted by

⁹⁰ Ibid 11.

⁹¹ Ibid 9.

⁹² Arendt, *Human* 31.

Nelson first appeared), the year that also saw the publication of Arendt's highly idiosyncratic theorization of "The Public and the Private Realm" in *The Human Condition*.⁹³

Upon considering the image of the private sphere that emerges between these two works, it becomes clear that Arendt's interest in the value and function of privacy should not only *not* be equated with the widespread investment in patriarchal privacy exhibited by proponents of capitalist democracy during the cold war. It should also be understood as harboring a severe critique of that form of attachment to the private realm. Indeed, *The Human Condition* in particular, through its attention to the "perfect" or uncontested "despotic powers" of the *paterfamilias*, could even be read as demonstrating significant affinities with what Nelson refers to as the exposure of the "dark side of private life" performed by the poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, though Arendt's work is not feminist in any conventional respect.⁹⁴ Rather, Arendt's discussion of privacy should be counted among a series of postwar inquiries that worked from a variety of perspectives to elucidate the growing alienation, conformism, and repression subtending daily life in the modern United States, and to demonstrate how postwar American society's systematic eradication of intimacy and interiority was creating a dehumanizing social environment on par with the most severe accomplishments of totalitarian regimes.

Aspects of this critique of American mass democracy can be found in a range of critical and sociological work produced throughout the 1950s and 60s by figures like

⁹³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1966 ed. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1951) xxiv; *Human* ch. 2.

⁹⁴ Arendt, *Human* 27; Nelson 95, 77.

David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and William H. Whyte.⁹⁵ However, two of the more insightful and extensive analyses of the totalitarian dynamic of postwar American society were put forward by Arendt and Herbert Marcuse. The work of these two theorists differs in a number of important ways. But Arendt's and Marcuse's writings from the postwar era share a concern with what they saw as an historically unique, and potentially devastating infiltration of the private sphere by the impersonal workings of what Arendt termed "mass society" and what Marcuse referred to alternately as "advanced industrial society" or the "affluent society."

For each of these thinkers, the private sphere is held out as a last reserve of inwardness – a subjective realm that houses or shelters the most basic aspects of inner experience, which are said to mark the difference between humans and things. Though both Arendt and Marcuse distinguish the private from the political realm, they also argue that political resistance is dependent on the existence of a private, experiential domain. As such, they offer an invaluable resource for any effort to understand what was at stake in the NAC's attempt to recover some vestige of privacy as a means of social and cultural rebellion, rather than simply cheering the historical passing of the private realm in the manner of the confessional poets. Arendt and Marcuse also articulate a distinctly European vision of the totalitarian dynamic of American mass society and mass culture that was informed by these theorists' unsettling proximity to the legacy of Nazism – a vision that intersects in important ways with that of Mekas, a Lithuanian poet displaced by WWII whose personal experiences with the extreme and subtle forms of violence perpetrated by fascism deeply impacted his subsequent writings on postwar American

⁹⁵ See David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1950); C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford UP, 1951); William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956).

culture. The work of Arendt and Marcuse therefore provides a valuable framework for contextualizing Mekas's commitment to inner experience as a life-sustaining force capable of countering the destructive tendencies of the twentieth century. By examining these writings more closely, we will be better equipped to understand how Mekas could believe that "Privacy will save the world."⁹⁶

III. Loneliness and One-Dimensionality

The Origins of Totalitarianism offers a particularly detailed historical and philosophical analysis of the relationship between totalitarianism and the private sphere. As noted above, one of the more striking arguments to emerge from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* concerns the historical innovation effected by totalitarian modes of dominance, which Arendt locates in this movement's unique penetration and destruction of all aspects of private life. As Arendt argues:

Totalitarian government, like all tyrannies, certainly could not exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities. But totalitarian domination as a form of government is new in that it is not content with this isolation and destroys private life as well. It bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging [to] the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.⁹⁷

For Arendt, totalitarianism's destruction of private life can be acutely perceived in the impact this mode of governance has on interpersonal and intimate relations. As Arendt explains, through systems of ubiquitous surveillance established by totalitarianism's "power nucleus," the secret police, and the institution of methods of punishment based on "guilt by association," totalitarian regimes create an atmosphere of

⁹⁶ Jonas Mekas, *I Had Nowhere to Go* (New York: Black Thistle, 1991) 92.

⁹⁷ Ibid 475.

mutual suspicion that permeates all forms of social relationships, turning everyone from casual acquaintances to friends, comrades to family members, into future enemies and detractors.⁹⁸ Totalitarianism seeks to transform its social body into an “atomized and individualized mass,” where all meaningful social ties have been severed, and all “channels of communication between individuals” have been blocked.⁹⁹ As Arendt explains, for the individual living under totalitarian rule, “the most elementary caution demands that one avoid all intimate contacts, if possible—not in order to prevent discovery of one’s secret thoughts, but rather to eliminate, in the almost certain case of future trouble, all persons who might have not only an ordinary cheap interest in your denunciation but an irresistible need to bring about your ruin simply because they are in danger of their own lives.”¹⁰⁰ As political movements that demand each member’s “unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty,” totalitarian regimes depend entirely on “completely isolated human being[s] who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, [derive their] sense of having a place in the world only from [their] belonging to a movement, [their] membership in the party.”¹⁰¹

Totalitarianism’s destruction of private life reaches further than the realm of social relations. As Arendt extensively details, because totalitarianism is geared toward the total and “permanent domination of each single individual in each and every sphere of life,” it also works to destroy the most basic aspects of inner experience that, according to Arendt, are constitutive of human nature itself – aspects like individuality, creativity, spontaneity, freedom of thought, and the human capacity for fabrication (as in “*poiesis*,

⁹⁸ Ibid 420, 323, 430-31.

⁹⁹ Ibid 318, 465.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid 323.

¹⁰¹ Ibid 323-24.

the making of things,” or “the capacity to add something of one’s own to the common world”).¹⁰² Through various forms of torture and conditioning that seek to destroy man’s psyche and capacity for resistance; the establishment of an intensely conformist citizenry composed not of multiple, unique persons, but “One Man of gigantic dimensions”; the reduction of man’s productive capacities and modes of activity to mere labor, or an effort to simply “keep alive”; and the subordination of all thought to the “logical” operations of party ideology, Arendt argues, totalitarianism seeks to transform its subjects into so many “ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov’s experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react.”¹⁰³

In Arendt’s schema, totalitarian domination is not achieved unless all spontaneity has been replaced by bundles of mechanical reactions and operations, and all individuals have been made equally superfluous. Because totalitarian ideology views the world in purely utilitarian terms, and seeks to organize the world in strict accordance with the inexorable progress of Nature or History, it cannot tolerate unpredictability, individuality, or the infinite variations of human character. This fact motivates Arendt’s assertion that totalitarianism aims toward “the transformation of human nature itself” through the destruction of the very *humanness* that defines mankind.¹⁰⁴

The condition of loneliness that Arendt designates as the basic experience of totalitarianism is a peculiar one. For Arendt, loneliness refers to an experience of “not belonging [to] the world” or “a situation where I as a person feel myself deserted by all

¹⁰² Ibid 326, 458, 475.

¹⁰³ Ibid 441, 453-55, 466, 475, 473.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid 457-59, 458; see also 472-74.

human companionship.”¹⁰⁵ And she distinguishes loneliness from solitude, noting that the former appears most generally when an individual is in the company of others with whom he or she “cannot establish contact.”¹⁰⁶ This inability to connect or communicate with others, according to Arendt, destroys both one’s sense of self (which is said to be established through that Platonic “dialogue between me and myself” which is constitutive of thinking), and one’s sense of reality (or of that “common world” constructed through mutual activity with others, which is to be distinguished entirely from the fictional vision of the world projected by totalitarian ideologies).¹⁰⁷ As Arendt explains, just as “the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends upon my being in contact with other men, upon our *common* sense which regulates and controls all other senses,” so too “the confirmation of my identity... depend[s] entirely upon other people” who alone can solidify one’s status as an “unchangeable individual whose identity can never be mistaken for that of any other.”¹⁰⁸ The “radical... desperat[ion]” that Arendt associates with loneliness comes precisely through this double loss of world and self: when lonely, “man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all,” and feels as if he were “abandoned by everything and everybody.”¹⁰⁹ Totalitarianism seizes on this situation, Arendt warns, by providing its lonely subjects with a fictional sense of meaning and participation, with a sense of belonging to an entirely “fictional world” that can be entered only through a complete self-abandonment to the reigning party line.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Ibid 475, 474.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid 476.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid 475-77; see also 466-67.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid 475-76.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 477, 476.

¹¹⁰ Ibid 477, 363.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, loneliness is said to be closely related to both “uprootedness” and “superfluosity,” two conditions that Arendt describes as “the curse of the modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution.”¹¹¹ And though she considers loneliness to be “one of the fundamental experiences of every human life,” Arendt also argues that totalitarianism’s establishment of a mode of domination based on this experience is rooted in very specific historical developments – what she refers to as the emergence of “classless societies” in pre-Hitler Germany and Stalinist Russia. As Arendt observes, while the rise of Nazism depended on a dramatic breakdown of traditional class systems in the wake of WWI, Stalin’s establishment of totalitarian rule depended on his active elimination of all forms of social stratification from post-revolutionary Russia.¹¹² According to Arendt, this historical disintegration or destruction of previous modes of social identification based on class, which Arendt terms the “fall of protecting class walls,” led to the establishment of societies – or more specifically, masses – comprised entirely of the “atomized, isolated individuals” through which totalitarian movements gain their momentum.¹¹³ These masses, Arendt asserts, “grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class.”¹¹⁴ Because Arendt views traditional class systems as providing individuals with a sense of “membership” and “protect[ion],” or a “sense of having a place in the world,” the breakdown of these systems is said to have resulted in the onset of a general condition of “homelessness,” leaving the newly (un)formed masses to

¹¹¹ Ibid 475.

¹¹² Ibid 312-13, 318-23.

¹¹³ Ibid 315, 323.

¹¹⁴ Ibid 317.

confront a “reality in which no place was left for them.”¹¹⁵ Within this context, Arendt explains, the aforementioned fictional world created and maintained by totalitarian movements offered a much needed source of “shelter” to “the new homeless masses.”¹¹⁶

While Arendt is careful to emphasize the historical and national specificity grounding the emergence of conditions like loneliness and homelessness in pre-totalitarian societies, one of the more alarming claims put forward in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* comes in Arendt’s assertion that, since the end of WWII, these conditions had become far more general:

Conditions in pre-Hitler Germany are indicative of the dangers implicit in the development of the Western part of the world since, with the end of the second World War, the same dramatic event of a breakdown of the class system repeated itself in almost all European countries, while events in Russia clearly indicate the direction which the inevitable revolutionary changes in Asia may take.¹¹⁷

Describing what she terms the development of “the psychology of the European mass man,” Arendt argues that the postwar breakdown of European class systems could be credited with establishing the widespread sense of “selflessness” experienced by Europeans, where selflessness refers not to some sort of altruistic idealism, but rather to “the sense that oneself does not matter, the feeling of being expendable.”¹¹⁸ Later in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she warns of the temptation to resort to purely utilitarian solutions for the problem of overpopulation caused by the increasing number of homeless masses moving through the modern world – solutions that, by viewing these masses as “economically superfluous,” might be attracted to the destructive but efficient answers to

¹¹⁵ Ibid 437.

¹¹⁶ Ibid 363, 437.

¹¹⁷ Ibid 313.

¹¹⁸ Ibid 315.

the problem of superfluous masses offered by the legacy of totalitarianism.¹¹⁹ And in the closing paragraphs of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt leaves the reader with this final warning: “What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century.”¹²⁰

It may be argued that the Euro-centric character of Arendt’s discussion of mass psychology, loneliness, and homelessness has little to offer a consideration of privacy in postwar American society. This argument would seem to be bolstered by Arendt’s claim in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the United States “knows less of the modern psychology of masses than perhaps any other country in the world.”¹²¹ However, with the publication of *The Human Condition* in 1958, Arendt dispenses with the Euro-centric character of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and comes to position a variety of the debilitating experiences initially conceived as specific effects of totalitarian domination as more general aspects of life in mass society, which are rendered no less inhuman by their newly “democratic” character.

Arendt’s return to the issue of loneliness in *The Human Condition* reveals this transition in her thinking. Considering how the term “private” originated as a marker of deprivation, as a designation for those persons (slaves, women, the propertyless) deprived of access to a public reality shared with others, Arendt writes:

Under modern circumstances, this deprivation of ‘objective’ relationships to others and of a reality guaranteed through them has become the mass phenomenon of loneliness, where it has assumed its most extreme and

¹¹⁹ Ibid 459.

¹²⁰ Ibid 478.

¹²¹ Ibid 316.

antihuman form. The reason for this extremity is that mass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well, deprives men not only of their place in the world but of their private home, where they once felt sheltered against the world and where, at any rate, even those excluded from the world could find a substitute in the warmth of the hearth and the limited reality of family life.¹²²

In terms almost identical to her aforementioned analysis of totalitarianism's destructive impact on both public and private life, Arendt here draws a direct parallel between the conditions of life under totalitarianism and those attaining in postwar American society, citing the American sociologist David Riesman's 1950 publication of *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, as reinforcement for her observation that loneliness had become a "mass phenomenon."¹²³ Less than a decade after the initial publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the incompatibility Arendt had earlier detected between totalitarianism and American democracy has vanished. With mass society's eradication of both the shelter offered by the public world and the warmth offered by the private home, where privacy functions as the guarantor of a form of humanness that reaches its highest level of expression in public, the threat of totalitarianism is positioned as a far more insidious, transnational reality of late modernity.

Parallels notwithstanding, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* employ rather distinct narratives when framing the deterioration of the public and the private sphere that determine both the loneliness of the modern individual and the homelessness of the modern masses. Whereas *The Origins of Totalitarianism* views the destruction of these spheres largely in terms of the depoliticizing, inhuman operations of totalitarian ideology and terror, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt presents a broader

¹²² Arendt, *Human* 58-59.

¹²³ Ibid 59, n. 52.

historical framework for understanding this phenomenon, arguing that the public and the private sphere that originated in classical Greece have, since the onset of the modern age, been rapidly and thoroughly “devour[ed]” by what she terms the rise of the “social realm.”¹²⁴ As Arendt explains, whereas the Greeks organized human existence around two distinct and opposing spheres of life, with the private understood as a sphere of “natural association whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family,” and the public understood as the realm of political action centered in the city-state, or the *polis*, the emergence of modern society is characterized most definitively by its eradication of this distinction.¹²⁵ In contemporary political thought, on the other hand, and particularly with the emergence of the modern nation-state, Arendt stresses, “the dividing line [between public and private] is entirely blurred, because we see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping.”¹²⁶

The social realm’s attempt to organize all modes of political, economic, and cultural difference into “the facsimile of one super-human family” blurs the division between public and private spheres in two basic ways. First, because the social turns previously private realms of experience into political matter, it transforms privacy into a collective concern and eliminates the private sphere’s capacity to function as a shadowy “hiding place” for those aspects of human existence and subjective experience that “cannot withstand the implacable, bright light” of publicity.¹²⁷ Second, because society organizes itself around the forced togetherness and uncontested, monarchical rule that

¹²⁴ Ibid 45.

¹²⁵ Ibid 24-25, 28-29.

¹²⁶ Ibid 28.

¹²⁷ Ibid 71, 50-51.

inheres within family life – requiring of its members “a certain kind of behavior” that is held in check not by a single individual, but by the equally tyrannical “no-man rule” of opinion – it eliminates the potential for spontaneous action and unique expressions of individuality that define public life in ancient political thought, penetrating down to the “innermost region” of the “human heart.”¹²⁸ This requirement that individuals “behave” forms the basis of what Arendt terms the “leveling demands of the social,” which – particularly in modern mass society, where conformism is said to reach its apogee – effectively flatten the diversity of perspectives of the public realm into the singular, monolithic viewpoint of the social family, with its “one interest and one opinion.”¹²⁹ Resuming her argument about the “common” put forward in the concluding section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt reasons that, because “the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself... [as] sameness in utter diversity,” the intensely conformist and monolithic character of the social “can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one’s own position with its attending aspects and perspectives.”¹³⁰ Which is to say, because the existence and objectivity of the common world can only be verified by judging one’s subjective perception or experience of it against that of the other, the conformism of mass society – which destroys the uniqueness of its individuals to such an extent that, for all intents and purposes, the other ceases to exist – renders impossible the common world’s objective appearance. This is the loneliness of the modern individual in mass society: deprived of all objective relations to others and of the

¹²⁸ Ibid 39-41. On the family as a natural association organized around necessity, and governed by the absolute power held by the *paterfamilias*, see pp. 22-28; on the distinction between the “political fellowship” of the public sphere and the “mere togetherness” of the family, see p. 36.

¹²⁹ Ibid 39-41, 46

¹³⁰ Ibid 57-58.

potential to exhibit his or her unique particularity, the individual is simultaneously without any realm of experience that exists apart from the operations of the social, any space of darkness or sanctuary to which that individual might withdraw and be with his or her self.

Though Arendt is not particularly interested in providing anything like a program for social change or for countering society's rise to ubiquity in *The Human Condition*, recent contributions to public sphere theory have argued for the contemporary political import of Arendt's vision of the public sphere.¹³¹ And such arguments resonate in important ways with Arendt's preferences in this text. Despite the value that Arendt attributes to the protective and reparative functions of privacy, and despite her defense – in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* – of the private sphere's integral role in retaining the mode of “life” that differentiates humans from mindless animals or marionettes, *The Human Condition*'s critique of the forms of violence, deprivation, and conformity that adhere within the private realm significantly complicates any attempt to read this work as advocating for the political significance of privacy or intimacy.¹³² Indeed, in *The Human Condition*, the private sphere is decidedly *apolitical*, or rather it is political only to the extent that it provides a structural opposition upon which the existence of a public realm depends. The private sphere's detachment from, and opposition to, the realm of politics is what grounds Arendt's critique of Rousseau's private “rebellion of the heart,” or his attempt to counter bourgeois conformism through unsanctioned expressions of

¹³¹ See, for instance: Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics” in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002); and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (Winter 1998). For a different engagement with Arendt's ideas about public action and performance, see Justus Nieland's intriguing account of the “mimetic-sympathetic public spheres” formulated through modernist cultures of performance in *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

¹³² Arendt, *Human* 64.

intimacy.¹³³ Because Arendt positions the public as the space of political action in this work, she can only view the “modern discovery of intimacy” exemplified by the writings of Rousseau as “a flight from the whole outer world into the inner subjectivity of the individual...”¹³⁴

This attempt to equate intimacy and privacy with public withdrawal reveals a tension in Arendt’s argument. In the face of distinctly totalitarian social pressures whose severity and radicality are said to stem from their penetration and eradication of all previously private realms of human experience, Arendt can only think intimate modes of rebellion in terms of disengagement. Though she isolates loneliness as mass society’s most distinctive and “antihuman” accomplishment, she does not concede any resistant potential to efforts at elaborating a distinctly “modern privacy [whose] most relevant function [is] to shelter the intimate...”¹³⁵ This tension reveals the persistence of a certain nostalgia for classical culture at the base of Arendt’s thought. At the same time that she defines the modern era in terms of a thorough destabilization of the classical division between private and public realms, her insistence on viewing all modern explorations of intimacy in terms of an abandonment of politics reveals her refusal to relinquish this division.

Marcuse’s critique of “one-dimensionality” and the historically unique demands this social development places on attempts to think political action provides a way of getting beyond this limitation in Arendt’s thought. Like Arendt’s work in *The Human Condition*, Marcuse’s highly influential indictment of American society in *One-Dimensional Man* hinges on a claim about advanced industrial society’s pervasive

¹³³ Ibid 36-37

¹³⁴ Ibid 69.

¹³⁵ Ibid 38.

destruction of all interior domains of human experience. For Marcuse, the modern era witnesses a new mutation in the processes by which individuals reproduce the external controls exercised by society, which he designates as a shift from “introjection” to “mimesis.” As Marcuse explains, while introjection refers to “a variety of relatively spontaneous processes by which a Self (Ego) transposes the ‘outer’ into the ‘inner,’” mimesis designates “an immediate identification of the individual with *his* society and through it, with the society as a whole...”¹³⁶ Introjection therefore “implies the existence of an inner dimension,” Marcuse observes, or a “private space” of “inner freedom” that is distinct from and even antagonistic to public opinion and behavior.¹³⁷ For Marcuse, this private space functions as the very “home” of critical reason, contradiction, and those aspects of negative thinking that allow the individual to transcend the realm of mere appearance and access the dialectical reality of their surroundings. However, it is precisely this “private space” of depth and interiority that is rendered inaccessible by the “one-dimensional” logic of advanced industrial society.

Marcuse’s analysis of one-dimensionality intersects in important ways with Arendt’s study of totalitarianism. According to Marcuse, one-dimensional society (or advanced industrial society) seeks to replace reason with the impersonal workings of “technological rationality,” which extend from systems of mass production, distribution, and communication to impact modern individuals down to their very “core,” replacing all forms of spontaneity by mechanical reactions, subordinating all thought processes and modes of interrelation to the logic of operationalism, and organizing instinctual drives, feelings, imaginations, and aspirations in accordance with the rhythms and logic of

¹³⁶ Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1991) 10.

¹³⁷ Ibid 10.

mechanical reproduction.¹³⁸ Due to the decidedly rational character of advanced industrial society's irrationality – or the way in which the actual inequality, oppression, alienation, and waste subtending modern systems of production and consumption are covered over by the ability of these systems to satisfy basic needs and provide various perks and comforts, and to do so in a highly efficient way – the very capacity for transcendence or resistance is effectively contained. As Marcuse puts it: “[I]n the contemporary period, the technological controls appear to be the very embodiment of Reason for the benefit of all social groups and interests—to such an extent that all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible.”¹³⁹ Unlike previous configurations of industrial society, whose claims to operate according to principles of reason “were always contradicted by the evident misery and injustice of the ‘great public bodies,’” and were thereby always susceptible to the emergence of revolutionary social movements, advanced industrial society eradicates the potential for even personal forms of dissociation, thereby denying the potential for such private modes of rebellion to develop into an effective political opposition.¹⁴⁰

In addition to echoing Arendt's anxiety about the loss of spontaneity and critical thought, Marcuse also associates one-dimensional society's colonization of the private sphere directly with totalitarianism. As he argues, totalitarianism does not only designate a specific form of government or party rule, but a “system of production and distribution” that “precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole.”¹⁴¹ For Marcuse, the productive apparatus of advanced industrial society “tends to become

¹³⁸ Ibid 11, 26-27, 32.

¹³⁹ Ibid 9.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid 15.

¹⁴¹ Ibid 3.

totalitarian to the extent to which it... obliterates the opposition between private and public existence,” and develops “new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion” based not on physical violence but on processes of tolerance, containment, and superficial forms of satisfaction.¹⁴² Rather than excluding particular social groups, experiences, or modes of expression, advanced industrial society simply incorporates them into its own logic, eradicating their oppositional or subversive components through a system of assimilation. And rather than perpetuating a social configuration based on material hierarchies and visible inequalities, the “new totalitarianism” of late capitalism founds itself on an endlessly inclusive pluralism, allowing all individuals equal access to the material goods and leisure activities that serve to perpetuate the reigning mode of production.¹⁴³

Despite these overlaps between Marcuse’s and Arendt’s theoretical frameworks, Marcuse diverges from Arendt on the matter of privacy’s relevance to politics. This difference comes through especially clearly in a lecture that Marcuse originally delivered in 1967, “Liberation from the Affluent Society,” which outlines a response to one-dimensionality by returning to the basic problem of conceiving the possibility of liberation from a society that is neither poor, nor disintegrating, nor explicitly terroristic. This “affluent society” is one that “develops to a great extent the material and even cultural needs of man... a society where liberation is apparently without a mass basis.”¹⁴⁴ Within such a situation, Marcuse argues, it is not enough to call for the constitution of a

¹⁴² Ibid xlvii.

¹⁴³ Ibid 61, 8.

¹⁴⁴ Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society” in Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume Three: The New Left and the 1960s, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2005) 77. This lecture was originally delivered at the Congress of the Dialectics of Liberation in London in 1967, and published in David Cooper, ed., *To Free a Generation: The Dialectics of Liberation* (New York, NY: Collier, 1969).

free society, as the peculiarity of late capitalism comes precisely through its perpetuation of a form of “liberty within a situation of servitude,” or its making-accessible of a form of freedom that – however false or limited – is still felt to be preferable to the violence and self-sacrifice required by revolutionary movements.¹⁴⁵ Rather, in the face of modern society’s “inva[sion of] even the deepest roots of individual existence, even the unconscious of man,” the potential for political resistance requires the creation of “qualitatively different values,” or of individuals who are driven by “new needs and satisfactions.”¹⁴⁶

In other words, the remarkable deepening of control in the affluent society demanded a complete rethinking of existing strategies of liberation. The possibility of resistance seemed to depend on a transformation of the inner, “organic” disposition of the individual, essentially presupposing the emergence of an entirely “new type of man, with a vital, biological drive for liberation...”¹⁴⁷ In this sense, when Marcuse comes to call for a “new anthropology,” or a concerted effort to bring this new man into being, he envisions a mode of practice oriented toward “opening and... activat[ing] a depth dimension of human existence,” or toward the production of an inner, subjective realm configured in opposition to the repressive aspirations instilled by the affluent society.¹⁴⁸ While Marcuse notes the “traditional weakness of emotional, moral and humanitarian arguments” in the context of an essentially political problem, he nevertheless insists that resistance to the affluent society requires an attempt to activate this inner register of

¹⁴⁵ Marcuse, “Liberation” 80.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid 81, 78, 79.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid 81. For more on Marcuse’s understanding of the “biological” register of these needs, see Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1969) 10 n. 1.

¹⁴⁸ Marcuse, “Liberation,” 82, 81.

experience, which is typically dissociated from the realm of politics.¹⁴⁹ As he asserts, “today qualitative change, liberation, involves organic, instinctual, biological changes at the same time as political and social changes.”¹⁵⁰ In stark contrast to classical conceptions of the private as wholly *other* to the space and time of political praxis, then, Marcuse here insists that the most integral dimension of political activity is located in the deep, interior recesses of the private self.

Marcuse’s call for a “new anthropology” resonates productively with the redemptive project of the NAC, and not only because Mekas often wrote of this project as an effort to “build... the New Man” by revitalizing the dwindling register of the “soul.”¹⁵¹ Marcuse also attributed a central role to art in his conception of this endeavor, explaining that such an anthropological project would necessitate a radical aesthetic practice capable of mobilizing the imagination toward an alternative world-building project. He envisioned an aesthetic in which:

sensitivity and sensibility, creative imagination play, [would become] forces of transformation... [and] would guide, for example, the total reconstruction of our cities and of the countryside; the restoration of nature after the elimination of the violence and destruction of capitalist industrialization; the creation of internal and external space for privacy, individual autonomy, tranquility; the elimination of noise, of captive audiences, of enforced togetherness, of pollution, of ugliness.¹⁵²

For Marcuse, such values were not conceived as bourgeois privileges or romantic ideals, but as “organic needs of the human organism” whose destruction “mutilates [that] organism... in a very real and literal sense.”¹⁵³ Unlike the critique of modern intimacy we

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 80.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid 82.

¹⁵¹ Mekas, “Cinema of the New Generation,” *Film Culture* 21 (Summer, 1960): 19. For more of Mekas’s thoughts on the “new man,” see especially “Notes on the New American Cinema” 103-107, and Mekas’s first feature, *Guns of the Trees* (1961).

¹⁵² Marcuse, “Liberation” 83.

¹⁵³ Ibid 83.

find in Arendt, Marcuse viewed the project of rebuilding the spaces of inner experience that had been obliterated by industrialization as integral to the formulation of anything resembling effective political opposition or liberation. His writings on privacy's oppositional value thus provide a highly constructive lens through which to reframe the NAC's insistence on the radical potential of personal film.

IV. An Intimate Cinema

Statements on the NAC's redemptive orientation were put forward by a number of different figures affiliated with the NAC in a variety of different contexts and forms. But the redemptive project of the NAC was announced and formulated most extensively by Jonas Mekas in a series of essays, editorials, statements, and movie reviews written between 1959 and the mid 1960s primarily in the pages of *Film Culture* and the *Village Voice*. In these writings, Mekas drew out lines of relation between a diverse set of independent film practices taking shape in the U.S. toward the beginning of the 1960s, and argued for a view of these practices as constituting a relatively unified cultural formation organized around a shared task or purpose. Despite clear formal, financial, and ideological differences separating the works of artists such as Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, Lionel Rogosin, Shirley Clarke, Ron Rice, Edward Bland, Stan Vanderbeek, Marie Menken, and Stan Brakhage, Mekas viewed such artists as representatives of a "new spirit in American cinema," whose disaffiliation from the mode of living propagated by the old America, and dissatisfaction with the "stiffness" and "overprofessionalism" of Hollywood film emerged from the same rebellious climate that

had spurred the formation of the various European new waves after WWII.¹⁵⁴ And though Mekas argued that the filmmakers comprising the NAC revealed distinct similarities at the level of style and mode of production, demonstrating a shared interest in improvisational engagements with the actions and situations comprising contemporary reality in the postwar U.S., as well as a lack of concern with professional standards or classical aesthetic guidelines and a commitment to low-budget filmmaking, it was these artists' common participation in a broader moral or ethical movement that was said to give the NAC its sense of unity and momentum.

Mekas's understanding of the ethical movement taking shape in the U.S. at the end of the 1950s revolves around a claim to historical rupture. Like many other critics and artists affiliated with the 1960s American counterculture, he conceived the process of generational dissociation underlying the emergence of the NAC in terms of what Fredric Jameson would call a "situation of modernity," or a coming-into-consciousness of a new historical period via the tangible modification of "a whole collective temporality."¹⁵⁵ Mekas's most involved discussion of this rupture comes in an early essay published in *Film Culture* in 1960 entitled "Cinema of the New Generation," where he argues for a view of the NAC as part of a broader turn to an aesthetic of spontaneity and immediacy manifesting itself in nearly every level of American cultural production at the end of the 1950s, from rock and roll to beat poetry, action painting, and experimental developments in dance, sculpture, and theater.¹⁵⁶ According to Mekas, the explosion of these distinctly modern artistic practices had to be understood as the outgrowth of a much larger socio-

¹⁵⁴ Mekas, "A Call for a New Generation of Film-Makers," *Film Culture Reader*, 74; "Cinema of the New Generation" 1.

¹⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002) 57, 18.

¹⁵⁶ Mekas, "Cinema of the New Generation" 1, 12-13, 19; see also "New York Letter" 119, 121.

historical transition that had been slowly altering the technological and economic conditions of daily life in the U.S. since the end of WWII, as well as the very “psychological” fabric of American society, impacting the “actions, emotions and dreams of the people” and bringing an entirely “new generation” into being with “completely different needs and surroundings that influence their very physical movements, their speech habits, their dressing habits and, naturally, their love habits.”¹⁵⁷

According to Mekas, the basic “temperament” of this new generation – which he refers to here as the “cold-war generation,” the “beat generation,” the “new American generation,” or simply the “new America” – was reflected in the young American artist’s valorization of impurity, roughness, and actuality over the “respectable classicism” advocated by established critics.¹⁵⁸ However, the particular “needs” driving these stylistic preferences were organized around moral issues: a need to locate some vestige of truth, sincerity, and humanness in a “phony” society, or to achieve some form of liberation from the increasingly repressive and restrictive atmosphere of the postwar U.S. This is what grounds Mekas’s claim, in a 1960 “Movie Journal” entry, that “the entire movement of the new America in the arts and life is primarily an ethical movement, a search for sincerity.”¹⁵⁹

To a certain extent, Mekas’s discussion of this process of historical transformation can be said to intersect with the broader body of discourse that emerged in the U.S. during the 1950s and 60s concerning the “end of ideology,” or the breakdown of traditional belief systems and the disintegration of previously held certainties after the war. For Mekas, the generational dissociation occurring in postwar American society was

¹⁵⁷ Mekas, “Cinema of the New Generation” 1.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid 1, 5, 14, 17, 9.

¹⁵⁹ Mekas, “Movie Journal,” Village Voice 30 March 1960: 16.

said to be predicated on the new America's realization that the mores and values, as well as the whole "way of life" established by the old generation, had become outmoded, thereby leaving modern man in a rather precarious position that Siegfried Kracauer poignantly described as being "ideologically shelterless."¹⁶⁰ In an address given to the Philadelphia College of Art in 1966, Mekas drew a parallel between his own sense of disillusionment after the war, which he described as a crippling loss of "faith in the goodness of man and progress of man" or a "shatter[ing]" of all of his beliefs and idealism, and the general feeling of disorientation and self-fragmentation permeating the emergent artistic culture in the postwar U.S., which was composed of "poets, and filmmakers, and painters... who were also walking like one thousand painful pieces," and who "felt that there was almost nothing to lose any more... [and] nothing worth keeping from our civilized inheritance."¹⁶¹ For Mekas, the NAC's much-maligned "unprofessionalism" was a direct expression of this condition. He considered the "shaky" camerawork of Frank and Rogosin, or the "fragile, searching acting style" embodied by artists like Ben Carruthers, to be indices of the "psychological... reality of modern man," or an unavoidable outgrowth of the new artist's struggle to feel out the contours of the "uncertain moral landscape" he or she had inherited after WWII.¹⁶²

Yet Mekas's conception of this process of ideological disintegration also differs considerably from more nostalgic and conservative commentaries on this process. For Mekas, the new generation's rejection of the American way of life was said to be motivated by its belief that the moral system of the previous generation was not just

¹⁶⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, paperback ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1960; 1997) 288. For other commentaries on the decline of previously operative values and conventions in postwar culture, see: Whyte, *op. cit.*, 3; Riesman, *op. cit.*, 25; and Mills, *op. cit.*, xvi.

¹⁶¹ Mekas, "Where Are We – the Underground?" in *The New American Cinema*, *op. cit.*, 18.

¹⁶² Mekas, "Notes" 105-06; *Movie Journal* 27.

anachronistic but immoral, which is to say, that the mores and conventions established by the old America had become profoundly dehumanizing, violent, and repressive. As Mekas argues in various contexts, the blatant dishonesty and lack of compassion in the postwar U.S. made the new generation feel that they had been “betrayed” by the mode of living established by the previous generation, which spurred the new America’s growing belief that “All public ideologies, values, and ways of life [had to] be doubted, attacked.”¹⁶³ Within this context, the NAC’s redemptive project came into being not as an attempt to regain or recover the lost coherence of a previously functioning moral system, but through a two-part movement of abandonment and rediscovery: by “believing only in immediate experience,” the artists of the NAC sought to shrug off all inherited cultural and perceptual frameworks and gain access to some “deeper” form of knowledge from which they could responsibly undertake the vital rebirthing process demanded by the transformations of the new historical era.¹⁶⁴ Anticipating Marcuse’s call for a new anthropology, Mekas believed that the scope of these transformations required nothing less than the creation of an entirely “New Man” capable of reversing the destructive course of modern progress.¹⁶⁵

Mekas outlines the dual project facing the new generation at the end of his 1959 essay, “New York Letter: Towards a Spontaneous Cinema.” As he writes:

The question is one of loosening the frozen sensibilities, of weeding out anachronistic moral, social and political clichés, the false authorities, the false purposes of life... [W]hen you don’t any longer know where and what the essence is, the surest way – if there is any way at all – is to throw away all inhibitions and lose oneself completely in the spontaneous

¹⁶³ Mekas, “New York” 121; “Notes” 103. See also Mekas, “Cinema of the New Generation” 19-20, and “Where Are We” 18-19.

¹⁶⁴ Mekas, “Cinema of the New Generation” 17, 19.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid 19.

improvisations that lead into the inner regions of our being: where, after all, everything rests.¹⁶⁶

In “Cinema of the New Generation,” Mekas frames this project in explicitly ethical terms, arguing that the NAC’s attempt to locate an “un-corrupt basis for... life” by descending ever-deeper into the “less contaminated depths of man’s soul,” formed the basis of this film culture’s contribution to the “ethical movement” of the new America.¹⁶⁷ And in “Notes on the New American Cinema,” Mekas argues that the new filmmaker’s decision to “direct his ear inward” in an effort to “[listen] deeper than [his] other contemporaries,” or his attempt to pursue a realm of “inner freedom” in direct opposition to the “centrifugal force” of postwar American society, constituted a distinctly “human act,” one that was “open[ing] new vistas for life” by “liberat[ing]... man’s spirit from the dead matter of culture.”¹⁶⁸ Earlier in his career as a film critic, Mekas had been a vociferous opponent of the personal aesthetic practiced by emerging experimental filmmakers in the U.S. like Brakhage and Kenneth Anger, criticizing such artists for failing to transcend their “private” dilemmas and utilize cinema’s potential for communicating universally intelligible statements on social issues ordered in accordance with a well-defined “moral stand.”¹⁶⁹ By the end of the 50s, however, when such a stable moral position was no longer felt to be tenable, Mekas came to locate cinema’s value in its ability to function as a medium for conducting self-shattering adventures (one “lose[s] oneself completely”) into the unexplored depths of inner experience, or “that valley of irrationality” housed by man’s “subconscious” or “core,” which seemed to offer the only

¹⁶⁶ Mekas, Movie Journal 1; “New York Letter: Towards a Spontaneous Cinema,” Sight and Sound 28.3-4 (Summer-Autumn, 1959): 121.

¹⁶⁷ Mekas, “Cinema of the New Generation” 19-20.

¹⁶⁸ Mekas, “Notes” 104, 106-07.

¹⁶⁹ Mekas, “The Experimental Film in America,” Film Culture Reader 22-23.

opportunity for the new generation to locate a true starting point from which to slowly begin the project of building the new man.¹⁷⁰

As such statements demonstrate, for Mekas, the ultimate significance of the NAC's artistic rebellion was intricately bound up with this film culture's investment in interiority. The NAC's exploration of the new generation's "inner landscape," which Mekas frequently described as the psychological, intellectual, and emotional realities of modern man, or the basic condition of man's "spirit" or "soul," was said to constitute this movement's most significant contribution to the history of American film.¹⁷¹ Mekas formulates this belief in his important 1962 survey of the NAC, "Notes on the New American Cinema." As Mekas explains, the release of John Cassavetes's *Shadows* in 1958 marked an historical "turn inwards" in postwar American cinema, one that distinguished the NAC from the mere "surface realism" practiced by independent filmmakers like Morris Engel throughout the '50s.¹⁷² As Mekas's writings on *Shadows* throughout this period makes clear, he believed that Cassavetes effected this inward turn not only by "focusing upon psychological realities" and encouraging his actors to "[search] into their own experiences" to find motivation for their performances, but also because *Shadows*' pairing of the aesthetic properties of documentary realism (natural lighting, location shooting, an emphasis on daily incidents, handheld cinematography, black and white film stock, etc.) with a highly improvisational, fragmentary, and seemingly "plotless" organization provided its viewer with a sense of gaining access to

¹⁷⁰ Mekas, "Cinema of the New Generation" 19-20.

¹⁷¹ Mekas, "Notes" 96, 103-04, 91. See also "Call" 74.

¹⁷² Mekas, "Notes" 91. For more on Mekas's critique of the "surface" aesthetic of popular, independent, and experimental American cinema, see "The Experimental Film in America," *Film Culture Reader*, 24-25; and "Editorial," *Film Culture* 10 (1956): 1-2.

the inner condition of the new generation.¹⁷³ Which is to say, because Mekas conceived the inner in stark opposition to the rational intellect and its worldly manifestations – imagining the soul as a deep, opaque realm of anarchic impulses wholly inaccessible to reason – he viewed Cassavetes’s apparent abandonment of established formal conventions for the sake of a disorganized but vital aesthetic as an effort to elaborate a filmic grammar structurally analogous to the chaotic movements of inner experience: a “*spontaneous cinema*.”¹⁷⁴

Mekas’s understanding of the NAC’s inward turn was not a conventional one, in other words. He did not seek to designate a process of communicating the internal dilemmas of an individual protagonist through an effective employment of traditional narrative forms, but something closer to an effort to remodel cinema in the disorganized image of the soul. At the level of practice, this took shape primarily through methods of improvisation, which Mekas conceived as a pathway to the deep, internal aspects of human nature that were being denied expression by postwar American society. As he argues in “New York Letter,” the NAC’s attempt to “capture life in its most free and spontaneous flight” stemmed from their desire to “grasp life from within and not from without” (a phrase he borrows from D.T. Suzuki), or from this movement’s investment in pursuing an “inner intelligence” directly opposed to the superficial, commercialized form of entertainment offered by Hollywood (that “extrovert art, made with, for, and because of money”).¹⁷⁵ It was through the medium of improvisation, Mekas wagered, that artists

¹⁷³ Mekas, “Notes” 91. For Mekas’s thoughts on *Shadows*, see also: “New York” 119; and “Cinema of the New Generation” 10.

¹⁷⁴ Mekas, “New York” 119, italics in original.

¹⁷⁵ Mekas, “New York” 119, 121; Mekas, “Editorial,” *Film Culture* 10 (1956): 1.

of the NAC could dispense with “the prearranged, the contrived mental structures, and [go] directly to the depths of the matter.”¹⁷⁶

That the NAC’s inward turn, and the broader emphasis on interiority underlying this movement, emerged as a direct response to the crisis of privacy outlined above can be readily discerned by considering one of the primary claims subtending discourse on the NAC. As has been shown, for Mekas, the NAC’s rebellion against the old America was driven by a belief that the reigning mode of living in the postwar U.S. was profoundly dehumanizing. And as Mekas’s reference to the “centrifugal” character of daily life suggests, this dehumanizing effect was said to be the result of American society’s hostility to all forms of interiority. The inner, the deep, the personal, the private: these were felt to be the very base of humanness, the site or source of the “true voice of man”; yet the impersonal workings of mass culture and mass society were said to be actively suppressing and eradicating these dimensions of experience in a manner that Mekas affiliated directly with fascism.¹⁷⁷ This belief in the dehumanizing effects of mass culture is what drives Mekas’s insistence on the life-affirming character of the new American filmmaker’s destructiveness. As he states in a passage of “Notes on the New American Cinema” that reveals Mekas’s participation in the postwar privacy crisis, while also revealing his perception that a spontaneous artistic practice could counter the apparent decline of privacy under modernity:

With man’s soul being squeezed out in all the four corners of the world today, when governments are encroaching upon his personal being with the huge machinery of bureaucracy, war, and mass communications, [the new artist] feels

¹⁷⁶ Mekas, “Notes” 105.

¹⁷⁷ Mekas, “Notes” 104. On the role of fascism in Mekas’s writings, see for instance: Mekas, Movie Journal 36-37; “Cinema” 17-18; “Movie Journal,” Village Voice 27 April 1960: 8.

that the only way to preserve man is to encourage his sense of rebellion, his sense of disobedience, even at the cost of open anarchy and nihilism.¹⁷⁸

The NAC's attempt to abandon established social, cultural, and artistic conventions is here attributed a distinctly *preservative* function.

The NAC's critique of the depthlessness and superficiality of modern society and mass culture is not limited to Mekas's writings, but in fact permeates critical and artistic statements put forward by a wide range of spokespersons and affiliates of the NAC, forming one of the central threads that links the otherwise diverse conceptions of cinema that emerged from this movement. Aspects of this critique can be found operating, for instance, in: Vanderbeek's influential definition of the underground filmmaker as someone working to create "private art that can be made public, rather than the public art we know, which cannot be made private"; Brakhage's vision of society as a "machine" "bent on destroying that which is alive within its individuals"; Rice's paranoid characterization of industrial society as a "monster" seeking to "rape your consciousness" through the various "spat loudspeaker direction systems" constituting mass culture; Cassavetes's condemnation of the "other-directed and mass-minded" character of the general public and Hollywood; and Kelman's aforementioned characterization of the NAC as a "spiritual medium" whose "primary drive is to replenish the human spirit which has been eroded as much as our earth has been by 'progress.'"¹⁷⁹ One of the more important iterations of this claim was formulated by Allen Ginsberg, who appeared in Frank and Leslie's landmark contribution to the NAC, *Pull My Daisy* (1959), and who

¹⁷⁸ Mekas, "Notes" 103.

¹⁷⁹ Stan Vanderbeek, "The Cinema Delimina: Films from the Underground," *Film Quarterly* 14.4 (Summer, 1961): 6; Brakhage's quote is taken from Mekas, "Notes" 103; Ron Rice, "Ron Rice: Diaries, Notebooks, Scripts, Letters, Documents," *Film Culture* 39 (Winter, 1965): 113; John Cassavetes, "What's Wrong with Hollywood?" *Film Culture* 19 (1959): 4-5; Kelman, "Anticipations" 24.

also provided poetic interludes for the soundtrack of Mekas's *Guns of the Trees* (1961) and appeared in various other films produced by artists of the NAC. Paralleling Arendt's association of mass society with totalitarianism's eradication of private life, Ginsberg viewed the growing system of mass communications in the U.S. as the primary instrument of a "vast conspiracy to impose one level of mechanical consciousness on mankind," and to "exterminate," in the manner of the *Gestapo*, all manifestations of "contemplative individuality," unsanctioned lifestyles, or spiritual knowledge from then-contemporary American society.¹⁸⁰ In Ginsberg's schema, the depthlessness of this system of "mass consciousness" revolved around a two-part exclusion: while the public were actively suppressing the "deepest and most personal sensitivities and confessions of reality," they were also denying artists' efforts to represent a "vast national subconscious netherworld" that thrived beneath the surface of 1950s America.¹⁸¹

While such statements differ in many ways, they provide adequate justification for viewing the NAC as a distinct expression of the "topological crisis" that Nelson reveals to have been one of the central impetuses behind American aesthetic production during the cold war, in the same way that Ginsberg and Mekas's comments on fascism establish an affinity between the redemptive project of the NAC and the more ordered critiques of the loss of privacy formulated by Arendt and Marcuse.¹⁸² Yet the distinctly oppositional thrust of the NAC's redemptive project also indicates that cold war America's efforts to promote the zone of privacy supposedly sheltered by the suburban household as an emblem of democratic freedom only constitutes one, particularly

¹⁸⁰ Allen Ginsberg, "America's Nervous Breakdown: Poetry, Violence, and the Trembling Lambs," *Village Voice* 26 August 1959: 1, 8. Mekas quotes from Ginsberg's piece in "New York Letter," "Cinema of the New Generation," and "Movie Journal," *Village Voice* 5 August 1959: 7.

¹⁸¹ Ginsberg 1.

¹⁸² Nelson 3.

paradoxical response to this topological crisis – a response that undermined the very privacy it sought to protect by publicizing and politicizing it.¹⁸³ The writings of Arendt, Marcuse, and the NAC demonstrate that concerns about the “loss” of privacy also motivated various criticisms of – and modes of resistance against – the dominant social and cultural tendencies of this period. Even amidst containment ideology’s attempt to regain private stability in the form of private property, the artists affiliated with the NAC strove to elucidate the totalitarian aspects of mass society and mass culture by decrying their destructive impact on the private self.

While the NAC’s investment in privacy might seem to reveal strange parallels between this “radical” film culture and cold war conservatism, it would be wrong to equate the former’s defense of inner experience with the latter’s promotion of suburbia as the site and source of human freedom. Emerging as an explicit effort to counter the dehumanizing logic of late-modern private and public spheres, the NAC’s drive to reclaim inner experience as a source of vitality and rebellion should not be read as a symptom of this movement’s secret conservatism, but as a testament to its participation in one of the defining political debates of the postwar era. Much like the confessional poets discussed by Nelson, these filmmakers “were preoccupied with the nature of privacy itself” at a specific moment when the value, meaning, and composition of the private stood at the heart of American public discourse.¹⁸⁴ And rather than affirming dominant conceptions of the private sphere as a stable, coherent space in which normative values are secured and reproduced, the NAC conceived this realm as a fluid, opaque experiential register destructive of such norms. Their view of the private thus adheres more closely to

¹⁸³ Nelson refers to this as the “governing paradox” of the Cold War (*Pursuing Privacy*, xiii).

¹⁸⁴ Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy* 29.

what Julia Kristeva has described as the domain of “intimate revolt” – a timeless, interior region of return and negation; the space “where we end up when we question apparent meanings and values.”¹⁸⁵

In addition to obscuring this movement’s participation in such debates, the tendency to read the NAC’s inward turn as an anachronistic detachment or apolitical withdrawal from the surrounding world risks eliding the social dimensions of this movement’s redemptive project.¹⁸⁶ To be sure, members of the NAC did value artistic practice as a mode of private introspection, or a purely personal method for evading one’s surrounding culture and accessing a more “authentic” register of experience. Yet the radical potential these artists attributed to cinema was also dependent on this medium’s relational basis, its orientation toward viewers.

This investment in cinema’s relational character is clearly expressed in this movement’s numerous statements on and references to the experiences of spectatorship. In various writings from the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, for instance, Mekas celebrates cinema for its intensely intimate mode of address, emphasizing the capacity of particular films to effect a profound mental, emotional, or spiritual transformation in their viewers. The poetic works of the avant-garde are praised for their ability to “stir us out of our numbness” or to plunge a “spearhead into the [viewer’s] heart” that dissolves the

¹⁸⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 2*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 43.

¹⁸⁶ The NAC’s purported withdrawal from the realm of politics is a recurring focus of critical writings on this film culture dating from the beginning of the ‘60s. These have ranged from Eduoard de Laurot’s characterization of the NAC’s commitment to a purely private mode of self-expression as an “effete” and “unmanly” abdication of the artist’s duty to communicate with his public, to Louis Marcorelles’s hyperbolic dismissal of the American avant-garde as an “individualistic” filmic movement “completely divorced” from its social context, and Annette Michelson’s more nuanced juxtaposition of the NAC’s view of art as “a construction in ethics” with a more overtly politicized avant-garde’s conception of art as “a ground for an ethos.” See: De Laurot, op. cit., 21; Marcorelles quoted in Mekas, *Movie Journal* 239-40; Michelson, op. cit., 417.

contours of his or her ego, provoking the viewer into a “communion” with the “soul” of the filmmaker through which that viewer is rendered “more beautiful.”¹⁸⁷ Mekas also insisted that the new cinema’s main value lay in its ability to “make us conscious” by activating that “area in the human mind (or heart) that can be reached only through cinema.”¹⁸⁸ A similar sentiment is expressed in Vanderbeek’s description of the underground artist as someone working to conjure “explosives vivid enough to rock the status quo.”¹⁸⁹ For Rice, cinema was similarly valued for its ability to “[clear] the windows of our perception,” or to “reach men through the heart and cause them to think.”¹⁹⁰ Yet Rice also viewed film as a medium of transportation, one which could make the spectator “soar... to impossible places” of pure sublimity, or “Locations that he cannot reach on the subway.”¹⁹¹ Rogosin attributed a somewhat different transporative effect to the filmic image. He believed that improvisational employments of film harbored a unique capacity to “[communicate the] human spirit” of a particular people or culture in a manner that could make individual viewers “feel emotionally” what that culture was really like, providing those viewers with a sense of “direct personal contact with the individuals of another society.”¹⁹²

A similar emphasis on the feeling of directness made possible by film is expressed in Kelman’s critical survey of the NAC, “Anticipations of the Light.” Kelman underscores the “passion[ate]” relational dynamic this movement establishes between film and viewer, one capable of “impact[ing]” the viewer’s inner disposition in a manner

¹⁸⁷ Mekas, “Movie Journal,” Village Voice December 17, 1958, 8; Mekas, Movie Journal, 47.

¹⁸⁸ Mekas, “Notes” 105.

¹⁸⁹ Vanderbeek 10.

¹⁹⁰ Rice, “Diaries” 97; notes for federal grant, 1 November 1962, Reginald Gay Collection of Taylor Mead and Related Materials, New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁹¹ Rice, “Diaries” 119.

¹⁹² Lionel Rogosin, Come Back, Africa: Lionel Rogosin – A Man Possessed (Johannesburg, South Africa: STE 2004) 34, 59

denied by conventional Hollywood cinema.¹⁹³ Whereas Hollywood narrative films force the viewer to experience events and insights “vicarious[ly],” Kelman argues, by “making us see things along with (or through) a protagonist with whom we identify, and a plot in which we are caught,” the NAC dispenses with such mediating structures as identification and narrativization in an effort to “project genuine experience and direct vision,” or to present the viewer with a stream of “filmic substance” (light, sound) to be experienced in all its “physical[ity]” and “immediacy.”¹⁹⁴ It was this relational capacity that motivated Kelman’s attempt to theorize the *work* performed by the NAC’s films, as can be seen in his reading of the NAC as an attempt to “restore subjectivity to its proper realm” and create, via *mythopoeisis*, new “inner worlds” that might “fill our rationalistic void.”¹⁹⁵

While other statements on spectatorship could be cited here, these suffice to demonstrate that the NAC’s efforts to develop a personal film practice were ultimately directed toward generating a more intimate effect on the spectator. Indeed, for all of these artists and critics, cinema is envisioned as a strangely immediate medium. The filmic image’s association with contingency and the instant made it appear uniquely capable of mirroring the wildness of inner psychological, emotional, and spiritual processes. And the NAC’s decision to affirm this wildness, rather than to contain it in the name of aesthetic coherence, seemed to facilitate a direct, unmediated encounter with these domains.

As Michelson argued as early as 1966, the imagination of film advanced in such statements is highly ideological, based as it is on an intensely naturalized perception of cinematic technology that, by seeking to void film’s status as “instrument of *mediation*,”

¹⁹³ Kelman 24, 28.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid 24-25, 28.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid 24, 25, 26-27.

reveals itself to be a thoroughly “pastoral attitude.”¹⁹⁶ However, the NAC’s investment in immediacy also cuts in another direction. It designates this movement’s interest in creating a distinctly affective filmic grammar, one capable of impacting the viewer’s outer, bodily sensorium with such intensity that the deeper recesses of that viewer’s inner soul would also be moved. This attempt to enlist cinema’s bodily address into a project of spiritual redemption points to the NAC’s recurrent emphasis on the material dimensions of the soul – an emphasis that resonates in intriguing ways with Arendt’s insistence, in a later work, on the “body-bound” nature of “soul-experiences,” or the body’s status as a register through which the concrete “language of the soul” gains expression in the form of affective experiences.¹⁹⁷ As if seeking to reverse the expressive movement envisioned by Arendt, the NAC sought to dialogue with the soul via this somatic language, endeavoring to resuscitate the former by addressing the body into which the soul’s fluid, chaotic impulses “[do] indeed ‘overflow.’”¹⁹⁸

The filmic image’s indexicality is clearly privileged in this conception of cinematic immediacy, both for its unique relation to the instant and the contingent, and for what Mary Ann Doane has termed the “disconcerting closeness of the index to its object,” or the index’s status as a material trace physically linked to the object it references.¹⁹⁹ But in direct opposition to contemporaneously developed theories of cinema that emphasized the index’s ability to “redeem... physical reality,” Mekas valued film’s immediacy for its ability to redeem inner life.²⁰⁰ The term “intimacy” is particularly well suited for discussions of the NAC’s redemptive project, then, not as a

¹⁹⁶ Michelson 419, 408.

¹⁹⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1977) 32, 33.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid 33.

¹⁹⁹ Mary Ann Doane, “Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction,” *differences* 18.1 (2007): 2, 4.

²⁰⁰ Kracauer 300.

marker of the habitual and the routine, but for its ability to hold together notions of self-knowledge, inwardness, and the essential (as in *intimus*: inmost, deepest) with the ideal of direct, impassioned modes of communication that underlie the NAC's writings on film (as in *intimare*: to put or bring into, drive or press into, to make known).

Lauren Berlant has touched on this dual orientation of intimacy in a recent publication, noting that intimacy's association with inwardness also opens out onto the other because of this term's affiliation with practices of intimation, where the latter entails "communicat[ing] with the sparest of signs and gestures."²⁰¹ Yet unlike the more normative conceptions of the intimate identified by Berlant, which have come to saturate American public culture since the onset of modernity, and which stubbornly cling to optimistic notions of transparency, stability, wholeness, and unity, Mekas believed that intimacy's value was to be located in its resistance to systematization – its capacity to uncover or activate an intensely vital dimension of experience incompatible with the fantasy of the rational subject. Mekas thus emphasized what Berlant describes as intimacy's *wilder* tendencies, its basis in a psychic or libidinal "drive... that is not necessarily organized [in accordance with convention], or any way."²⁰²

Mekas's investment in the defamiliarizing and destabilizing potential of cinema's intimacy is best expressed in a review of Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957), which is worth parsing before moving on to an analysis of the NAC's films. Mekas describes Bergman's film as a "classically simple," "down-to-earth film" that was uniquely attuned to the level of the concrete, or the "universally identifiable" dramatic

²⁰¹ Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue" in *Intimacy*, ed. Berlant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 1.

²⁰² Ibid 4.

incidents and experiences that punctuate and define everyday life.²⁰³ Recounting the narrative of the film, which revolves around a particularly callous, elderly doctor's journey through the Swedish countryside, and his encounter with a series of persons and childhood memories that send him into vertiginous bouts of contemplation, Mekas expresses a certain fascination with the interactions and encounters that provoke this process of self-reflection, referring to them as "concrete emotional clashes and concrete dramatic situations" that force the doctor to "face his whole life, to evaluate it, to reject it, and to try to correct it."²⁰⁴ For Mekas, these experiences are conceived in particularly violent terms: he refers to them as "clashes which cut into one's consciousness with the sharpness of a lash," which leave man in "anguish and fear" by forcing him to confront "the crumbling of [his] entire life," and which, by "corner[ing man] into facing himself," effectively "burn him out, purify him, change him."²⁰⁵ Yet as this last note on purification and change suggest, in Mekas's eyes, these rupturing, self-immolating experiences were felt to radiate with a revitalizing, beautifying power. As he explains, "the film ends in such a clarity, serenity, and peace that it leaves one in ecstasy, admiration, wonder" – an assertion that intersects with a number of statements made by Mekas on the healthy, life-affirming forms that violence and destruction sometimes assume.²⁰⁶ For Mekas, these ecstatic, blissful experiences were valued for their ability to erode the contours of the artificial, socially-imposed egos circumscribing an individual's thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, so that he or she might gain some insight into some eternal realm of truth or beauty.

²⁰³ Mekas, "Movie Journal," Village Voice 1 July 1959: 6.

²⁰⁴ Ibid 6, 11.

²⁰⁵ Ibid 6, 11.

²⁰⁶ Ibid 11.

It is neither surprising nor problematic that Mekas's formulation of this delightfully incongruous understanding of cinema's potential – somehow both spiritual and secular, transcendent and profane – appears in a review of what would now be considered a rather traditional instance of European art cinema, whose use of symbolism and classical narrative economy Mekas would later denounce as commercial, uncinematic, pure “theatre.”²⁰⁷ In his early years at *Film Culture* and the *Voice*, Mekas's attempt to envision a new cinema wholly other than that being mass-produced by Hollywood or meticulously composed by a budding culture of international *auteurs* – his interest, as he once put it, in a “cinema that doesn't yet exist” – occurred through a sort of critical *bricolage*, whereby Mekas culled glimpses of vividness and intensity from the otherwise formulaic, clichéd workings of various B-grade Hollywood thrillers and science fiction movies, independent documentaries, star performances, and foreign arthouse offerings, and then assembled these into a haphazard, patchwork imagination of the cinematic that, to him, eventually came to be most fully embodied or realized by the NAC.²⁰⁸ We can say, then, that the fascination and excitement Mekas exhibits in his review of *Wild Strawberries* stems from this work's dramatization of the intimate, life-altering experiences that the films of the NAC would come to perform. In other words, while Bergman's film narrates a series of encounters with these experiences through the figure of a protagonist, thereby leaving the viewer to feel or undergo them vicariously, the NAC seeks to present these experiences in all their concreteness and immediacy through the matter of film itself, so that the viewer might encounter their forcefulness

²⁰⁷ Mekas, *Movie Journal* 23.

²⁰⁸ Mekas, “Movie Journal,” *Village Voice* 13 April 1960: 10.

directly.²⁰⁹ The impact these “lashes of experiences and memories” have on the old doctor in *Wild Strawberries* is precisely the work that the films of the NAC seek to accomplish: they mean to “do something good to us,” to reactivate the inner recesses of man’s soul.²¹⁰

Such statements on cinematic immediacy demonstrate how, for artists of the NAC, it was only when the intimate artistic products of their personal film practice were projected to a public audience that cinema revealed its true redemptive potential: its ability to “move our corrupt little minds and hearts” or more simply “to refresh us...”²¹¹ The NAC’s inward turn was motivated not only by a deeply felt anxiety about the decline of inner experience, but also by a belief in cinema’s ability to counter this tendency on a potentially mass scale. It was not merely cinema’s usefulness for self-expression but its unique combination of an intimate form and a public mode of address that allowed this seemingly sterile communications technology to assume a new and vital function, becoming the privileged medium through which artists of the NAC sought to create new forums for the cultivation of inner experience. By considering how this ambition gained expression in the NAC’s films, we can better understand its terms and implications.

V. Toward a Grammar of Filmic Immediacy

Each aspect of this movement’s inward turn – its motivating concern over the decline of interiority, and its outward orientation toward the viewer – informed its aesthetic rebellion. Though frequently phrased as a rejection of form and formal

²⁰⁹ Kelman 24-25.

²¹⁰ Mekas, “Movie Journal,” *Village Voice* 1 July 1959: 11; Mekas, *Movie Journal* 64.

²¹¹ Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 64; Kelman, “Anticipations,” 25.

concerns, this rebellion in fact depended on the development of a complex formal vocabulary emphasizing signs of amateurism and contingency as markers of spontaneity. Paraphrasing Roland Barthes, we might describe these signs as carriers of a distinct “immediacy effect.”²¹² The visual dimensions of this vocabulary are well-known: the incorporation of shaky, hand-held camerawork, over- and underexposed shots, unconventional framing, and abstract sequences; the use of grainy, black and white 16mm film stock originally intended for newsreels and military surveillance; the blending of fictional sequences involving non-professional actors, location shooting, and improvisation with *vérité* footage – all strategies serving to convey what Ricky Leacock once described as “the feeling of being there.”²¹³ Yet this production of immediacy also involved important sonic components, including highly innovative experiments with sync sound cameras, forays into pseudo-spontaneous voiceover, and perhaps more significantly, a frequent incorporation of various “impure” and improvisatory musical forms. While postwar musical genres such as rock and jazz provided valuable models for filmic improvisation throughout the ‘60s, these musical forms became important resources in the NAC’s redemptive project because of their ability to generate intense feelings of vitality and presentness in their audience.

A prime example of this imbrication of sonic and visual strategies can be found in Mekas’s own use of folk songs in his first feature, *Guns of the Trees*, an experimental narrative film that centers on a pair of young couples living in New York City, but which mainly seeks to evoke the more general “atmosphere” of Cold War America. This atmosphere is figured in the film as a constant and unpredictable oscillation between

²¹² Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect” in *The Rustle of Language*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Oxford, 1986).

²¹³ Quoted in Mekas, “Notes,” 93.

paranoia and potential, or between the sense of despair inherited by the new generation after the destructive legacy of WWII, and glimpses of the nascent – but still vulnerable – culture of hopefulness this new generation was working to create. The two sides of this conflict are signified visually through the film’s juxtaposition of barren cityscapes and white-collar work environments that actively militate against any expression of personality with scenes depicting heartwarming quotidian occurrences, such as spontaneous dance sessions, children skipping, and friends playing in the rain. But this contrast figures sonically as well. For instance, a series of vitriolic poetry interludes spoken in voiceover by Ginsberg portray Cold War America as a terrifying collage of atomic bombs, depthless mass spectacles, environmental destruction, and pervasive government surveillance, though Ginsberg’s recitation of a portion of his “Sunflower Sutra” in the closing moments of the film still leaves room for a glimmer of optimism, celebrating the “beautiful golden sunflowers” growing beneath the wreckage of western modernity in the depths of the human soul. The film’s music similarly alternates between an actively irritating, flute-heavy score composed by Lucia Dlugoszewski – which resembles the sound of air raid sirens, evoking the looming threat of nuclear catastrophe – and “warmer” folk songs featuring fiddles and banjos, imperfect guitar picking, and earnestly-sung lyrics about birds, crying, and the open seas. Affirming James J. Farrell’s observation that the resurgence of folk music in the early ‘60s was part of a broader cultural rebellion against “the mechanical modernism of the Atomic Age,” *Guns of the Trees* employs folk as a way of gesturing to an escape route from the dehumanizing confines of Cold War American culture, or of cinematically imagining a simpler, more organic mode of living.²¹⁴ Indeed, two separate scenes – one at a bohemian house party,

²¹⁴ James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: Making Postwar Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 73.

another at a bar – feature folk songs performed by musicians within the diegesis, as if *Guns of the Trees* were attempting to filmically extract folk’s intimate cultural cachet, its emphasis on oral tradition and small-scale performances, to convey a fleeting feeling of togetherness to the viewer, one capable of overcoming cinema’s inherent separation of profilmic activities from the audience.

Mekas’s interest in utilizing folk to produce such intimate effects can be seen quite clearly in this film’s most whimsical scene, where Ben (Ben Carruthers) and Argus (Argus Spear Juillard) are found lazing in an overgrown field at the margins of the city as the sun shines down and a rendition of “Little Birdie” plays on the soundtrack. The couple approaches an empty freight car at the edge of a rail yard bordering the field. As an amused Argus looks on, Ben begins to play, pouncing into and atop the car as if he were a hobo hopping a ride. The sense of spontaneity conveyed by Ben’s improvised act is amplified by the use of shaky, imprecise camerawork, which lags behind and fails to frame portions of Ben’s performance, as well as by the addition of a pair of quick jump cuts that interrupt the action at unexpected moments. These markers of amateur filmmaking are echoed by the rough-hewn quality of the vocals, banjo playing, and fiddle work featured in the song, which are riddled with accidental dissonances and traces of materiality (hesitations, the grain of the voice, etc.)

Such technical imperfections generate a rather tangled cluster of responses in the viewer. Along with their vaguely endearing quality, they serve as indices of bodily presence that seem to “humanize” the highly mechanical processes of film and music production in a manner that resonates with the scene’s bucolic setting, conveying a feeling of reciprocity to the viewer – a sense of being directly involved with the actors

and filmmakers responsible for this sequence's production – that is suggestive of the face-to-face exchanges of pre-modern communities. Anticipating Kelman's claim that Hollywood's repressiveness resulted from its unnecessary addition of layers of artificial mediation, *Guns of the Trees* does not utilize such imperfections to effect a cognitive awareness of cinema's technological base (as in Brechtian distancing), but to naturalize the filmic apparatus to the point of its disappearance. Providing an illusory sense of involvement with the activities comprising the profilmic, amateur imperfections thus function in this film as instances of cinematic excess: traces of contingency that seem to exceed the logic of classical representation. As Mekas knew very well from his experiences as a film critic, encounters with cinematic excess can generate what Paul Willemsen has described as an invigorating, affective "spark" in the viewer trained in conventional modes of cinematic perception, producing the sort of stirring, revelatory experiences that Mekas originally discovered while watching decidedly non-classical iterations of postwar cinema.²¹⁵ Indeed, in a 1962 description of *Guns of the Trees*, Mekas explains that the film's messy aesthetic developed as a conscious effort to create an essentially excessive cinema that would be more conducive to such experiences. By jettisoning conventions of narrative realism and coherence for a disordered, untidy form modeled as an "accumulative emotional fresco," he hoped to "confront [the viewer], eye to eye, with the soul of modern man."²¹⁶ The inclusion of impure sounds and images was thus part of a strategy to force the viewer to encounter the irrational workings of inner experience.

²¹⁵ Willemsen describes this experience as a mode of cinephilic pleasure in Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994) 235-242.

²¹⁶ Mekas, "Notes," 97.

Though created within a decidedly different socio-political context, Lionel Rogosin's feature length docu-fiction, *Come Back, Africa* (1959) utilizes amateur techniques and footage of musical performances to produce a similar feeling of intimacy. Like *Guns of the Trees*, Rogosin's film exhibits a palpable anxiety about the dehumanizing effects of modernization. Here, however, these effects are localized in the urban spaces of apartheid-era Johannesburg, and the revitalizing force of the human spirit emerges primarily from the dynamic environs of Sophiatown, an impoverished yet culturally vibrant suburb of Johannesburg that was in the process of being razed by the South African government when Rogosin shot his film in 1958. Though it may seem problematic to consider a film about South African apartheid within the context of an analysis of anxieties about privacy in the postwar United States, Rogosin's motivation for making *Come Back, Africa* in fact intersects in important ways with the postwar privacy crisis discussed above, and particularly with the way in which this crisis was "scripted" as a development intricately bound up with totalitarianism. In his posthumously published memoirs of his experiences creating this film, for instance, Rogosin explains that he was driven to make *Come Back, Africa* because, in the aftermath of WWII, he felt a strong "conviction that anything remotely resembling fascism had to be fought with all the energy that one could possibly muster."²¹⁷ For Rogosin, the distressing parallels he saw between the legacy of Nazism and the barbaric racism structuring daily life in both South Africa and the United States left him with a "desperate need to communicate to people everywhere the disastrous effects of such unchecked primitive behaviour," thus

²¹⁷ Rogosin, op. cit., 18.

motivating his decision to “fight this ill-conceived ideology with the most effective weapon available to me, cinema.”²¹⁸

In a manner that resonates with Arendt’s and Marcuse’s belief that the novelty of totalitarianism resided in its eradication of all forms of privacy and humanness, *Come Back, Africa* frequently associates the dehumanizing effects of apartheid with the impoverished living conditions suffered in the slums and suburbs of Johannesburg, exhibiting a clear anxiety over the lack of stable home-spaces in these locales and on the negative impact that racism has on notions of selfhood and identity. For instance, the South African government’s destruction of Sophiatown is continuously registered through shots of crumbling houses and haphazardly assembled shanties vulnerable to external threats, and the living conditions endured in such areas are repeatedly designated by the film as animalistic or inhuman, whether through cutaways to the many, undomesticated animals that mill about in these areas, or through exchanges of dialogue concerning the government’s refusal to let black South Africans to “live like people.” The lack of stable spaces of privacy is ultimately represented as tragic. Toward the end of the film, police burst into the bedroom of Vinah, who is the wife of the film’s protagonist, Zacharia, a black migrant worker who moves to the city in search of employment only to suffer the dehumanizing effects of apartheid. The police find Zacharia sleeping illegally in Vinah’s bed and arrest him. A short while later, in what is the most devastating scene of the film, Vinah is home alone in a sparse room she has rented in Sophiatown while Zacharia remains in jail. A local gangster, Marumu, enters the home and murders her, undeterred by the flimsy door that separates this interior realm from the outside world. The porosity of the public/private divide, or the vulnerability that results from the loss of

²¹⁸ Ibid 18.

a secure border between the domestic and the social, thus figures at the heart of the film's condemnation of apartheid.

Alongside this attention to the dangers that result from a deprivation of privacy, however, *Come Back, Africa* also devotes a good deal of time to celebrating the forms of public intimacy that circulate through Sophiatown, largely by way of a representation of the many vibrant musical performances that flash up in this space, and the punctual, fluid communities these performances generate. As a politically-charged examination of racial divisions in South Africa, *Come Back, Africa* was shot secretly with a small crew, a cast of non-professional actors, a loose script, and a rushed production schedule to evade government censorship. Despite these considerable material limitations, however, the film employs specific audio-visual techniques to establish a coherent opposition between the liveliness of Sophiatown and the impersonal deadness of Johannesburg.

In keeping with Rogosin's personal impression of Johannesburg as a "ghost city" whose gloomy architecture and "death-like silence" conveyed a sense of impending violence, a recurring series of documentary sequences portray the city as an inhuman space where alienated masses file to and from work surrounded by rigid, modernist high-rises, eerily unpopulated construction sites, and broad patches of urban waste and debris. The images are largely seen through observational long shots frequently taken from detached, elevated positions with a static camera, and are often accompanied by the repetitive, mechanical rhythms of drumbeats, though the initially silent architectural sequence that opens the film is suddenly punctuated by the more distressing sound of an alarm bell ringing.²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Ibid 22.

Sophiatown on the other hand is figured as an intensely rich source of energy and community, a haphazardly assembled shantytown whose relative disorder and porosity allows impromptu forms of collectivity to suddenly emerge into being, whether on a street corner or in a shebeen frequented by a young Miriam Makeba. In contrast to the observational images of Johannesburg, the most extensive documentary sequence depicting life in Sophiatown utilizes footage taken primarily from handheld or mobile cameras positioned at street level, which is edited into highly dynamic sequences that employ multiple, short takes and framings that shift between long shots of group activities and closer images of local residents. Ostensibly following Zacharia and Vinah as they stroll through Sophiatown in search of housing, the camera encounters four separate musical performances in the open streets: a large and highly improvisatory drum and whistle circle; a few men playing horns; a small group of men singing religious hymns; and an expansive wedding party accompanied by musicians with drums and horns. While this sequence's visuals seem to mimic the dynamic, improvisational character of the music featured on the soundtrack, the camera itself responds to the inclusive energy that radiates from these performances, becoming progressively immersed in the groups it documents until it finds itself in the middle of the dance floor at the wedding reception, surrounded by horns, sharply-dressed men, and dancing children.

Unlike its silent, ghostly counterpart, Sophiatown held an “almost magical quality” for Rogosin that he associated closely with this suburb’s integration of music into daily life.²²⁰ In his account of *Come Back, Africa*’s production, he discusses how the brass bands, penny whistlers, and singers that he came across when visiting Sophiatown

²²⁰ Ibid 33.

generated a “highly contagious” spirit, or an especially palpable atmosphere of “rapport” whose swirling, affective currents would inevitably fill visitors to this suburb with a vitalizing sense of humanness and fellow-feeling.²²¹ For Rogosin, the highly affective, sympathetic atmosphere produced by such musical performances was inherently political: it allowed outsiders to develop a deeper, more personal understanding of the African people that could cut across artificial barriers such as race and nationality, giving them an embodied experience of the “warmth of life” pervading Sophiatown that could replace distorted representations of African culture.²²² Because Rogosin believed that neorealist filmic strategies could provide viewers with a profound feeling of proximity to or involvement with persons and communities depicted on screen, he adopted a neorealist style when filming musical performances and daily activities in Sophiatown in an effort to capture the intimate atmosphere of this locale and transmit it in a highly tactile manner to audiences throughout the world, affording them a “sense of direct personal contact” with Sophiatown’s invigorating ambience.²²³ “I didn’t want the film to be a pure polemic on political terms ‘about’ the wrongs and injustice of apartheid,” Rogosin writes, “I wanted also a communication of human spirit so that the people on the other side of the barrier could feel emotionally what Africa really is like and not what their particular mentality has created for them – the stereotype image.”²²⁴ As with Mekas’s embrace of excess, Rogosin’s interest in cinema’s immediacy and tactility was predicated on an assumption that such inner, emotional modes of knowledge had fallen into disrepair with the onset of late modernity.

²²¹ Ibid 34, 36.

²²² Ibid 29.

²²³ Ibid 59.

²²⁴ Ibid 34.

The intimate value attributed to improvisational music also comes through in a number of the NAC's engagements with jazz, a musical form whose capacity to produce intense sensations of immediacy in both artist and audience afforded it a central role in this movement's films. While jazz music is thus employed at the level of the soundtrack to convey a sense of modernity in works such as *Shadows*, *Lemon Hearts* (Vernon Zimmerman, 1960), *The Flower Thief* (Ron Rice, 1960), and *The Cool World* (Shirley Clarke, 1964), Bert Stern's documentary of the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival, *Jazz on a Summer's Day* (1959), utilizes footage of live performances by musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Mahalia Jackson to produce a feeling of directness that Mekas was quick to invest with redemptive potential. "The young works of the New American Cinema [such as *Jazz on a Summer's Day*] are criticized by audience and reviewers for their roughness and for their technical imperfections," he complained in a "Movie Journal" entry from the spring of 1960, adding "if we could just sit, open-eyed, completely noncritical, and be anti-art, anti-cinema for ten minutes, going through a sort of Actors' Studio 'seeing' lesson—we might start a revolution in ourselves."²²⁵

Even Shirley Clarke's *The Connection* (1962), which departs dramatically from then-fashionable *vérité* conventions, employs footage of jazz performances in a similar manner. Though *The Connection* presents these performances in a thoroughly fictional context, purporting to provide documentation of a group of jazz-musician junkies originally recorded for a documentary about drug addiction, the film's artificial narrative is continuously interrupted by lengthy sequences of hard bop sessions featuring musicians such as Freddie Redd and Jackie McLean. Generally shot with a roaming camera that slowly glides past or quickly pushes in on the sweaty faces and jumping

²²⁵ Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 15-16.

fingers of such musicians, these musical sequences pierce through the fictional gloss of the mise-en-scène, bringing the filmic image's indexical character to the fore and producing a seemingly direct relationship between film and viewer that denies the voyeuristic distance typically fostered by narrative cinema. For Clarke, this sense of directness was central to her understanding of cinema's dance-like qualities. As she states in an interview with Gretchen Berg published in a 1967 issue of *Film Culture*:

In *The Connection*, when the camera is in the middle of a group and chases after one character, thus rotating 360 degrees, here you have a very definite dance sensation. Basically, what you're including is a kinetic response in the audience... All my films are dance films... [W]hen I try to communicate with my cameraman sometimes I find myself dancing in order to describe the camera movements I want him to do. I am trying to give him my rhythm, my breathing. Hopefully, this is then communicable to the audience.²²⁶

Though articulated in a less romantic way, Clarke's belief in the "dance film" as an iteration of cinema capable of transmitting the internal and corporeal rhythms of the director to the audience parallels Stan Brakhage's and Mekas's more well-known statements on the camera as an "extension" of the author's body or nervous system.²²⁷ Clarke does not invest this communicative capacity with a redemptive potential. However, her interest in employing kinetic techniques to overcome the barrier between artist and audience speaks to her belief that cold war culture was defined by a palpable absence of intimacy and relationality. As she stated in a later interview with Lauren Rabinovitz:

Everybody thought the film—like the play—was mainly about drug addiction. But I do not think that is what the play is about, nor do I think the film is about that. I think it's about alienation, and that was something with which I did

²²⁶ Gretchen Berg, "Interview with Shirley Clarke," *Film Culture* 44 (1967) 52-53.

²²⁷ See for instance: Brakhage's statement on the camera quoted in Michelson 417; Mekas, "Where Are We" 20-21.

identify. Those were the days when I had a deep understanding of the word [alienation], and drugs as yet had nothing to do with it.²²⁸

Though also a fictional film, Frank and Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* culminates in an intra-diegetic jazz session that relates to those featured in both *The Connection* and *Jazz on a Summer's Day*. Based on the third act of an unproduced play written by Jack Kerouac, and featuring performances by Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky, the film depicts a humorous encounter between some drunk poets, a railroad worker named Milo, his wife, and a Bishop in a Manhattan loft, which ends when Milo and a friend suddenly take up horns and begin playing jazz. Extending the Beats' attempts to produce a spontaneous mode of literary composition modeled on jazz, *Pull My Daisy* seeks to integrate jazz's improvisational dynamic at the level of film form, utilizing quick, jerky camera movements, imperfect framing, improvised performances, shots of inconsequential objects and details, and a slang-ridden, pseudo-free-form voiceover performed by Kerouac to create what Mekas heralded as a "true cinemadynamics," or a mode of film practice aimed not only at achieving a direct "contact" with the flux of "immediate experience," but also at transmitting the tactile "impact" of this experience to the viewer.²²⁹ Describing *Pull My Daisy* as a highly affective "portrait of the inner condition of an entire generation," Mekas conceived the event of viewing this film as a sort of reciprocal play between twin interiorities: the film is said to project, into the viewer's inmost core, a chaotic audio-visual expression of inner experience itself.²³⁰

Along with their shared interest in improvised musical forms and performances, films such as *Guns of the Trees*, *Come Back, Africa*, and *Pull My Daisy* also exhibit a

²²⁸ Lauren Rabinovitz, "Choreography of Cinema: An interview with Shirley Clarke," *Afterimage* 11.5 (December 1983): 10.

²²⁹ Mekas, "Cinema of the New Generation," 14, 13, 17.

²³⁰ Ibid 14.

problematic affiliation of intimacy with persons of color. Echoing Rogosin's valorization of the "authenticity," "exuberance," and "enjoyment of life" displayed by black South Africans, *Guns of the Trees* frequently contrasts the spontaneous movements, amorous interactions, and carefree attitude of Ben and Argus (both of whom are portrayed by non-white actors) with the existential brooding of this couple's white friends.²³¹ In contrast, *Pull My Daisy* offers what Parker Tyler once criticized as an uncomfortably "ofay" portrait of bohemianism.²³² Nevertheless, its celebration of jazz as a means of intimate revolt is part and parcel with the Beats' well-known romanticization of the African American jazz musician as a symbol of intuitive knowledge, sexual energy, psychic union, and social detachment.²³³ In keeping with what Sally Banes has termed the "essentialist positive primitivism" that structured countercultural engagements with race during the '60s – that is, the assumption that favorable qualities were engendered by race itself and intrinsic to racial minorities, who were often held to be closer to humanity's "natural" condition – non-white bodies and cultural practices are located in these films as latent reserves of intimate potential, or natural resources from which the vitality being suffocated by then-dominant white culture could be extracted, harnessed, and transmitted to the viewer with the aid of cinema.²³⁴ For Banes, this primitivizing tendency reflects the broader "anti-enlightenment triumph of the body over rationality" that held sway in the '60s counterculture.²³⁵ Because the body was affiliated with an inner, irrational mode of

²³¹ Rogosin 23, 24, 33.

²³² Parker Tyler, "For *Shadows*, Against *Pull My Daisy*," in *Film Culture Reader* 111.

²³³ James discusses this aspect of Beat culture in *Allegories* 96-98.

²³⁴ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 206.

²³⁵ *Ibid* 206.

knowledge, the “surplus embodiment” displayed by various racial and ethnic minorities came to be a vital asset in the NAC’s redemptive project.²³⁶

Edward Bland’s *The Cry of Jazz* (1959) directly engages this relationship between improvisatory music, immediacy, and race, while also approaching it in a manner that differs from other works affiliated with the NAC. An essay film that was made by a group of African American intellectuals in Chicago, *The Cry of Jazz* was promptly embraced by Mekas as a work of the NAC for its intense “passion” and personal vision.²³⁷ Bland’s film features extensive sequences depicting jazz performances, including rare documentary footage of Sun Ra and his Arkestra playing a score composed by Bland himself.²³⁸ Employing a framing structure that mimics generic conventions of the educational film – a dramatic depiction of a racially charged argument between black and white members of a Chicago jazz club leads to a detailed exposition on the nature of jazz – Bland’s work sets out a polemical view of jazz as an authentic cultural expression of the “American Negro.”²³⁹ Though the film does confirm jazz’s inherent claim to improvisation and “presentness,” Bland also recasts this temporal character as a direct outgrowth of the oppressive living conditions suffered historically by African Americans. Having been stripped of all forms of cultural history and collective memory by slavery and denied any capacity to imagine a viable future by American racism, Bland argues, African Americans created jazz as a means for achieving spiritual transcendence through a “worship of time in its vivid present”: “Jazz is a musical expression of the Negro’s

²³⁶ On the “surplus embodiment” invested in gendered and raced subjects in American culture, see Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), esp. ch. 3.

²³⁷ Mekas, “New York,” 121.

²³⁸ Edward Bland, “On ‘The Cry of Jazz,’” *Film Culture* 21 (Summer, 1960): 31.

²³⁹ Ibid 30.

eternal re-creation in the eternal present.”²⁴⁰ The white hipster’s turn to jazz in the 1950s is thus viewed by Bland as an instance of cultural appropriation, though *The Cry of Jazz* also discerns a kernel of hope in this appropriation, arguing that white America’s engagement with the vital spirit inherent in jazz might give them access to a form of humanness that they otherwise lack.

Much like Mekas and Kelman, Bland also expressed an interest in utilizing film’s directness and immediacy to reconfigure the relational dynamic of spectatorship. Throughout the film, the pedagogical voiceover is supplemented by *vérité*-style documentary footage shot in African American communities throughout Chicago, which presents fleeting glimpses of black children and adults playing, walking, conversing, working, shooting pool, and singing – images that seek to embody what the film describes as the spirit of “joy in suffering” that defines jazz. As Bland explains in a statement concerning the aesthetic basis of *The Cry of Jazz*, this footage was central to his construction of the film as a sort of “religious ritual”:

Religious in the sense that everywhere one touches, hears, sees, or feels one encounters the variegatedness of the subject matter while experiencing its identity; and ritualistic in the sense that the musical, visual, and literary operations would so cohere as to create a particular pantheon of values expressive of the essence of the being and becoming of the American Negro.²⁴¹

Bland’s emphasis on the tactile and emotional character of this audio-visual encounter, and his investment in film’s ability to transmit the “essence” of the American Negro’s spiritual struggle to the viewer, demonstrates significant overlaps between *The Cry of Jazz*’s guiding project and the redemptive ambitions of the NAC. Yet Bland’s subordination of the film’s documentary footage to its thesis, a decision that stemmed

²⁴⁰ Ibid 29.

²⁴¹ Ibid 31.

from his belief in the necessity of linguistically anchoring the polysemic character of the filmic image to avoid misinterpretation, also indicates the considerable distance existing between the pedagogical thrust of *The Cry of Jazz* and the valorization of irrationality exhibited by a film like *Pull My Daisy*. For Bland, the jazz musician's "worship of the vividness of the present moment" was said to fulfill a vital function for African Americans of the postwar era, allowing them to temporarily regain the freedom of soul they had been denied by American racism. Yet *The Cry of Jazz* ultimately casts improvisatory immediacy as an imperfect mode of cultural resistance. Because improvisation holds no future orientation, the film argues, it is merely a holding action and is of no use in effecting the wide-scale social transformation demanded by the inhuman conditions of late-modern America.

VI. Between Presentness and Pedagogy

I end with this note on the role of pedagogy in *The Cry of Jazz* because I think this film's attention to the shortcomings of presentness offers an important corrective to the revolutionary claims that came to structure the NAC's redemptive project. As has been shown, Mekas believed that this movement's personal films were capable of transforming the underlying spiritual composition of the individual viewer. And it was his hope that this transformation would cause the viewer to alter his or her activities and beliefs, forcing this viewer to encounter the essential "goodness" of humanity in a manner that would lead him or her to thereby reject the immorality and ugliness of postwar American society and pursue a more beautiful mode of living.²⁴² Yet the connection between these two moments – one's encounter with inner experience, and one's decision to act in a

²⁴² Mekas, *Movie Journal* 131.

more moral way – was not theorized by Mekas during his initial formulation of the NAC’s redemptive project. Which is to say, because Mekas conceived inner experience as fundamentally disorganized, irrational, anarchical, and even “stupid,” his theorization of this project could not account for the way in which an intimate encounter with the spirit of “idiocy” embodied by the NAC’s films might provide viewers with a more truthful moral framework through which to navigate their subsequent engagements with the world.²⁴³

Over the course of the ‘60s, Mekas would increasingly attempt to account for this oversight through intermittent inquiries into the importance of form, which would eventually lead him to emphasize the moral function of aesthetic organization, and to critique amateur art for its distinctly debilitating effects. This shift in his critical position occurred more-or-less contemporaneously with the displacement of the Beats’ anti-aesthetic by the calculated orderings of structural film. In a “Movie Journal” column on the films of Ken Jacobs published on July 17, 1969, for instance, Mekas states this newfound investment in form rather bluntly: “in art nothing else matters besides form.”²⁴⁴ These later analyses of form reiterate, in a modified version, Mekas’s earlier investment in the transformative power of cinema, arguing that artworks with a clearly ordered form, where form is defined as “that radiance from within, to which a shape attains when in a given situation it realizes itself completely,” have the capacity to “transform [us] into... better human being[s]” by “get[ting] very directly to us, and mak[ing] us more radiant,” or “produc[ing] in us the states and forms of radiance” that “help to sustain man,

²⁴³ On stupidity, see: Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema” 92; Movie Journal 63-65.

²⁴⁴ Mekas, Movie Journal 351.

spiritually, like bread does, like rain does, like rivers, like mountains, like sun.”²⁴⁵ Yet in this naturalized conception of film practice, the productive function of art – its ability to directly produce the radiant forms of inner experience (“that radiance from *within*”) in the depths of a viewer’s spirit – is given a distinct “shape,” order, and coherence (“All confusing matters eliminated”); in short, a logic.²⁴⁶

In its essence, Mekas’s valorization of form’s radiant power can be seen as an attempt to put forward a newly formalist iteration of the NAC’s redemptive project. And the basic logic he comes to attribute to form might be understood as filling the aforementioned theoretical void in his earlier writings, in that the particular “shape” of form’s radiant power here provides the viewer with something like a moral code or directive: a sensory orientation toward “happiness” that prevents one from living a life that is in conflict with “beauty and truth.”²⁴⁷ Indeed, in this same column, Mekas even refutes new criticisms of the American avant-garde voiced by members of the New Left who rejected the “apolitical” character of Jacobs’s newly formalist works in the wake of May ’68, by asserting that, as “manifestoes of the politics of truth and beauty,” a politics that “mean[s] no harm,” Jacobs’s films “belong to the strongest political statements made by anybody working in cinema today.”²⁴⁸ However, Mekas’s movement toward a pleasant, harmless political art and away from his earlier interest in the violent, defamiliarizing intensity of avant-garde cinema seems to have been accompanied by a decline in his capacity to conceive anything like political action.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ Ibid 351-52. Mekas attributes this definition to Bernard Berenson.

²⁴⁶ Ibid 351.

²⁴⁷ Ibid 351-52. For a related discussion of happiness, see Mekas, “Notes on Some New Movies and Happiness” in *Film Culture Reader*.

²⁴⁸ Mekas, *Movie Journal* 351-52.

²⁴⁹ Ibid 1.

As he explains in an earlier “Movie Journal” entry: “The only action, besides love, that one can take... is... to increase [man’s] knowledge of himself so that he wouldn’t do anything that is against himself—because to do harm to others is to do harm to yourself.”²⁵⁰ Published on September 26, 1968, Mekas’ rejection of “action” and conflict here was most certainly at odds with the New Left’s novel approach to political radicalism, which – as Michael Renov has argued – departed from the Popular Front’s goals of base-building and unification by seeking “the intensification of social contradiction to the point of rupture,” rather than clean solutions to political problems.²⁵¹ In this sense, Mekas’s valorization of form at the end of the ‘60s, and the life-affirming, spiritual reveries that accompany an encounter with the “pleasant currents” of affective energy emitted by well-ordered artworks, would seem to offer a poignant example of what Marcuse referred to as the ultimately harmless, easily containable efforts to liberate the human sensibility as a wholly “private factor,” rather than “as a force for transformation of human existence and of its environment.”²⁵²

For Marcuse, the revitalizing function assumed by radical aesthetics within the context of the affluent society – art’s drive to reach and revitalize human interiority – was positioned as the initial stage in a more long-term project of world transformation, one that art could never achieve on its own.²⁵³ According to him, the process of carrying out such a project always “remains the task of political action” where “the artist participates *not as artist*.”²⁵⁴ As a means for moving from one stage of this radical project to the

²⁵⁰ Ibid 323.

²⁵¹ Michael Renov, “Newsreel: Old and New. Towards an Historical Profile,” Film Quarterly 41:1 (Autumn, 1987): 22.

²⁵² Mekas, Movie Journal 309; Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society” 82.

²⁵³ Ibid 81.

²⁵⁴ Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society” in Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume Four: Art and Liberation, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2007) 122.

other, Marcuse placed a crucial emphasis on pedagogy, or more precisely, on a form of education that “must involve the mind *and* the body, reason *and* imagination, the intellectual *and* the instinctual needs.”²⁵⁵ It was his belief that such a form of education would be capable of acknowledging late capitalism’s development of a mode of “social engineering” capable of dominating all previously private realms of human experience, while still insisting on the indispensable role of reason in providing such inherently unstructured experiences with a specific – and specifically political – rationality: namely, “the reconstruction of the polis.”²⁵⁶ To the extent that the NAC’s attempt to redeem interiority refused to direct or orient the latter toward such a world-transformative practice, its desire to create a cinema of “luminous colors and heavenly sounds” that would “change our cities, our faces, our movements, our voices, [and] our souls” could only ever be incomplete.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society” 85.

²⁵⁶ Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society” 122.

²⁵⁷ Mekas, “Where Are We” 21.

CHAPTER TWO

HOMELESS MOVIES

I. Bringing Man Home

In a 1966 speech delivered to the Philadelphia College of Art, Jonas Mekas sought to explain the postwar American avant-garde's growing emphasis on an aesthetics of amateurism by situating this emphasis as an artistic response to the widespread absence of "home" in late modernity. As Mekas states:

What we are doing comes from the deeper needs of man's soul. Man has wasted himself outside himself; man has disappeared in his projections. We want to bring him down, into his small room, to bring him home. We want to remind him that there is such a thing as home, where he can be, once in a while, alone and with himself and with a few that he loves close to him, and be with himself and his soul—that's the meaning of the home movie, the private visions of our movies.²⁵⁸

Though this passage is excerpted from a speech concerning "underground" film specifically – or the more explicitly counter-cultural variant of American avant-garde film practice that is generally understood to have followed from the New American Cinema's (NAC) dissolution around 1963-64 – Mekas's description of the avant-garde filmmaker as someone working to "bring [man] home" in fact stands as a highly condensed summation of the redemptive project of the NAC. Here, the primary impetus driving avant-garde film practice lies in the basic lack of humanness and intimacy in modern mass society, or in the artist's sense that the impersonal conditions of life in the postwar U.S. had severed man's relation to the inmost region of his "soul." And though

²⁵⁸ Jonas Mekas, "Where Are We—the Underground?" in The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1967) 20.

the inhuman “projections” of postwar mass culture are deemed representative of (if not responsible for) this condition, in keeping with Mekas’s perception of the productive dimension of the NAC’s rebellion, the task of preserving or restoring this inner realm is attributed wholly to cinema; or more specifically, to a “private” mode of avant-garde film practice felt to be capable of bringing the viewer into a seemingly unmediated relation with the stuff of inner experience. As Mekas goes on to argue, the postwar American avant-garde’s signal achievement lay in their creation of movies that are “so personal” they feel “like extensions of our [the filmmakers’] own pulse, of our heartbeat, of our eyes, our fingertips.”²⁵⁹ In this intensely romantic expression of cinema’s intimate potential, redemptive value is invested in cinema’s immediacy and tactility, as the relationship between artist and audience is conceived on the order of a direct caress or communion, where the viewer “experience[s] admittance into the sanctuary of [the artist’s] soul” and thereby “become[s] more beautiful,” as Mekas states in another context.²⁶⁰ Restating the avant-garde’s commitment to countering modern mass society’s hostility to interiority, this conception of cinema’s redemptive potential – this belief in film’s capacity to “bring [man] home” – is still very much enmeshed in the postwar “privacy crisis” outlined in the previous chapter.

Yet there is something curious about Mekas’s investment in the reparative potential of home in this speech, or in his attempt to attribute some distinctly *avant-garde* value to a mode of filmmaking oriented toward restoring man’s relation to home. Is it strange that Mekas’s invocation of the familiar notion of homelessness-as-modern-

²⁵⁹ Ibid 20.

²⁶⁰ Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 47. On the event of spectatorship as a form of communion, see also Mekas’s “Why Do People Like Morbid Movies?” *New York Times* 3 August 1969.

condition enters onto the scene of American cultural discourse at the tail end of a massive project of national domestication?²⁶¹ As numerous historians of post-WWII American society have shown, and as my first chapter details, one of the most significant socio-cultural developments that occurred during this period of American life lay precisely in dominant American society's wide-scale embrace of suburbanization as a solution to the social and political unrest that took shape after the war, as well as the psychological turmoil induced by growing concerns over nuclear conflict. Over the course of the late 1950s, as extensive projects of suburban housing construction radically reconfigured the basic fabric of daily life for the large majority of middle-class Americans, the suburban household was idealized as a material repository of the stability, plenitude, and autonomy that postwar Americans longed for – a “dream house” to use the Levittian rhetoric of the moment. And as the “bedrock” of a growing mass-consumption economy, the suburban home also became inseparable from matters of patriotism and citizenship with the onset of the cold war, assuming enormous import in American domestic and international politics.²⁶² Indeed, the stabilized and modernized form of domesticity manufactured by American mass culture during this period operated as *the* public face of capitalist democracy itself: employed as “weapons” in capitalist propaganda, glossy images of domestic bliss were projected to the world at large as advertisements of an historically new brand of freedom founded on material affluence, heteronormative intimacy, and the sanctity of the private sphere.²⁶³ When combined with the actual mass settlement of the

²⁶¹ For a useful summary of discourse on homelessness under modernity, see Anthony Vidler, “Introduction,” The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

²⁶² Lizabeth Cohen, A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America (New York: Vintage, 2003) 122.

²⁶³ Beatriz Colomina, Domesticity at War (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) 12.

new suburban frontier that occurred during the postwar era, the proliferation of such images would seem to make redundant Mekas's contemporaneous assertion of the need to "remind [man] that there is such a thing as home."

But what is the status of "home" in Mekas's speech? As is suggested by his occasional diatribes against the "Beautiful American Home" in his "Movie Journal" column for the *Village Voice*, Mekas was not unaware of the social, political, and economic value that dominant American society had invested in the middle-class suburban household during the postwar era.²⁶⁴ Like other critics of normative domesticity writing at the time, he considered popular imaginations of the happy and healthy suburban home circulating through postwar culture to be wholly illusory, covering over the actual alienation subtending Americans' private lives (as well as the injustices structuring their social world) with a sheen of material abundance.²⁶⁵ It would thus be a mistake to align his attempt to envision an avant-garde film practice capable of bringing the modern individual back home with normative domestic propaganda of the cold war. Rather, Mekas's decision to locate homelessness as the central ailment of the modern individual reiterates the anxiety he expressed continuously throughout the early '60s over postwar American society's perceived eradication of the workings of inner experience. By stating that the absence of home concerns, first and foremost, "the deeper needs of man's soul," Mekas thereby reframes his earlier statements on the value of human interiority through recourse to a metaphor of home. Within the framework of this speech,

²⁶⁴ Mekas, *Movie Journal* 135, 186-88; see also 176-78.

²⁶⁵ This position is expressed most fully in a 1961 "Movie Journal" entry, wherein Mekas rejects then-contemporary efforts to valorize the privately owned suburban household as the material embodiment of the American dream, arguing that the middle-class lifestyle subtending this dream was immoral and this apparently "clean, wise, white house" was itself "really disease-infested" (Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Village Voice* 15 June 1961, 13).

home is not conceived as a stable site or space (house, homeland, etc.), but as an experiential condition arising from the cultivation of intimate relations, whether these be with one's self or "soul", with others (those "few that he loves close to him"), or even with cultural products (the "projections" comprising the individual's environment). Though Mekas employs a metaphor of home in this passage, his interest in cinema's capacity to "bring [man] home" should therefore be read quite literally: it was his belief that the "private visions" being publicized by the avant-garde could cinematically generate the conditions of possibility for individuals to regain an experience of home, or reestablish contact with those inner experiences being denied expression by postwar American society.

As a statement on the necessity of home put forward during a period within which the middle-class household was firmly positioned as the lynchpin of conservative ideology, Mekas's reformulation of the NAC's redemptive project in this speech encapsulates an intriguing paradox structuring his critical writings from this period. Though he rejected the middle-class lifestyle sheltered within the "disease-infested" confines of the postwar suburban household, he nevertheless embraced the concept of home for its critical or oppositional value, asserting that avant-garde home movies could generate a form of intimate relation that would itself function as a "protest and... critique of the existing order of life..." Which is to say, while he considered the dominant *configuration* of domestic life holding sway in then-contemporary U.S. culture to be dehumanizing and impersonal, he simultaneously emphasized the need to retain the life-sustaining potential harbored within the *figure* of home, arguing that intimacy and vitality connoted by this figure were essential to any project of alternative world building. In

keeping with the general spirit of the '60s counterculture, Mekas's conception of this project was unabashedly mystical: he speaks, for instance, of the home as harboring "that wisdom which is as old as the earth... the mystical, the eternal," and of the avant-garde's desire to locate "something joyful deep within us, deep in the stars, and... bring it down to earth so that it will change our cities, our faces, our movements, our voices, our souls..."²⁶⁶ In attempting to envision a process of world transformation and a condition of being "at home," he thus swerved perplexingly into the otherworldly and the astral. Yet despite the limitations of Mekas's program for social change, to view his celebration of such things as privacy, intimacy, and the home in this speech as simply apolitical or escapist would be to divorce it from its social and historical context. Mekas is here found articulating an alternative imagination of home within a socio-political climate wherein the meaning of "home" was not supposed to be up for debate. When viewed alongside cold war America's attempts to render an arbitrary, historically contingent fiction of domestic life as the image of Home *tout court*, Mekas's defense of the home movie appears less like a reactionary call to abandon the political than something more closely resembling an instance of semiotic struggle. Rather than abandoning a concept that he knew to be central to conservative ideology of the period, Mekas asserts a claim over it, investing it with alternative values, meanings, affects, and origin stories.

To read Mekas's speech in this manner, as complicating then-dominant efforts to naturalize and privatize the meaning of home by offering another narrative of home through which modes of avant-garde practice could be organized and articulated, it is not necessary to reclaim Mekas as a "radical" figure or to assert that his writings about the mystical and the personal were "really" political all along. As we saw in the previous

²⁶⁶ Mekas, "Where Are We" 19, 21.

chapter, amidst the increasing radicalization of the counterculture over the course the 1960s, Mekas sought to distance himself from both political activism and all forms of “action” more broadly conceived.²⁶⁷ This was not a political filmmaker in any standard sense of the term. But he remained a filmmaker nevertheless, and not only one involved in the active creation of cultural objects and images, but one committed to the publicization of alternative representations of intimate spaces and activities at a time when such representations were subject to intense scrutiny, regulation, and resistance.

In order to attend to the political import that such practices assumed within their specific, socio-historical context, it is necessary to adopt a less-conventional understanding of the political, one capable of accounting for Mekas’s involvement in a struggle waged throughout the postwar period over the representation of domesticity and the circulation of such representations. From this angle, Mekas’s defense of home movies, his efforts to conceive the critical potential of home, and his own depiction of alternative home-spaces in the content of his films appear as attempts to contest the terms of appearance itself, or to challenge the norms and conventions that delimited commonly held perceptions of home within postwar American culture. The stakes of this “politics of representation” concern the availability to perception of images, scenarios, and narratives of alternative modes of habitation with which individuals script personal trajectories and reorganize material practices. Yet in the context of the cold war, this practice also opened onto broader political horizons. Because images and notions of home were so laden with ideological value during this period, with the home functioning as a “symbol of democratic liberty” in Deborah Nelson’s terms, the avant-garde’s attempts to revise that

²⁶⁷ See, for instance, Mekas’s inclusion of Barbara Rubin’s claim to have “abandoned all action” in his “Notes on Some New Movies and Happiness,” *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square, 2000) 323.

symbol – or to alter or interrupt the relationship between symbol and symbolized – also posed a threat to the grounding myths and assumptions structuring the new socio-psychological dwelling place constructed by late-modern capitalist democracy.²⁶⁸ Posing the question of home in the films and statements produced by this avant-garde, and of the strategies it employed to remind itself of the possibility of home, is thus simultaneously to ponder the uncanny architecture of that dwelling place, its historical failure to provide a viable refuge for the homeless.

II. Homeless Movies

Mekas's concern over the absence of stable dwelling places in modernity cannot be divorced from his status as a displaced person uprooted from his home in Lithuania by the Second World War. As Jan-Christopher Horak has recently noted, "the idea of *Heimat*... remains the structuring absence at the center of Mekas's work."²⁶⁹ Yet in "Where Are We—the Underground?," homelessness is not framed as a matter of displacement but of what Mekas perceived to be a more general sense of alienation pervading artistic circles in postwar New York City. Upon arriving in New York from Europe, Mekas explains in this speech, he was surprised to discover a whole culture of aimless artists whose core beliefs had been fractured much like his own by the atrocities of WWII: those "poets, and filmmakers, and painters... who were also walking like one thousand painful pieces."²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) xiv.

²⁶⁹ Jan-Christopher Horak, "Regarding Mekas: Avant-Garde Film and Audience Subjectivity," *Millennium Film Journal* 53 (Fall/Winter 2010-2011): 58.

²⁷⁰ Mekas, "Where Are We" 18.

This assessment of the postwar avant-garde resonates in important ways with a central problematic of this artistic culture, one that is especially prevalent in the works of the NAC. Indeed, a general condition of homelessness saturates the filmic expressions of this movement, appearing sometimes as the primary subject matter of individual films, other times as a somewhat peripheral theme, symbol, or narrative device, and still other times as a more amorphous, extra-textual ground driving a particular artist's engagement with the cinematic. Different variations on this condition can be seen, for instance, in: the emphasis on disenfranchised and unsheltered populations or figures exhibited by films such as *On the Bowery* (1956), *Come Back, Africa* (1959), *The Cry of Jazz* (1959), *The Cool World* (1964), and *The Brig* (1964), as well as the ruminations on modern loneliness and urban alienation put forward in *Shadows* (1959), *The Savage Eye* (1959), and *Guns of the Trees* (1961); the celebration of beatific vagabondage displayed in *Pull My Daisy* (1959), *The Flower Thief* (1960), and *Hallelujah the Hills* (1963), and the more sober representations of rootlessness and exile seen in works such as *Senseless* (1962) and *Quixote* (1965); nostalgic or comedic lamentations over the destruction of Victorian-era houses by urban renewal seen in *Centuries of June* (1955) and *Lemon Hearts* (1960), as well as the imaginative recasting of marginal urban spaces as precarious sites of habitation in Willard Maas's *Narcissus* (1956), the "rubble films" of Jack Smith, or Harold Humes's never-completed *Don Peyote*. The temporary runaways and middle-class domestic ambitions represented in the films of Morris Engel (*Little Fugitive* [1953], *Lovers and Lollipops* [1956], and *Weddings and Babies* [1958]) are also pertinent here, as is the destabilization, inversion, or perversion of normative domestic interiors performed by works as diverse as *Desistfilm* (1954), *Wedlock House* (1959), *Overstimulated* (1960),

The Connection (1961), *To LA... With Lust* (1962), *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963/82), *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1959-63), and the early 8mm films of the Kuchar brothers (*The Thief and the Stripper* [1959], *I Was a Teenage Rumpot* [1960], *Night of the Bomb* [1962], *The Confessions of Babette* [1963], etc.)

How can we account for the appearance of these different figures of homelessness in the films of the NAC? Although the intensely heterogeneous character of such films is generally understood to complicate any effort to conceive the NAC as a unified “movement,” the pervasiveness of homelessness suggests the presence of a heretofore unacknowledged “pressure for coherence” structuring and binding these otherwise distinct artistic productions.²⁷¹ Homelessness operates in all of these films as something like a primary generative force – a disturbance that motivated the formulation of the filmic statements comprising this movement – or a point of cathexis upon which the divergent energies of the NAC converge. While this film culture is often attributed with popularizing a home movie mode of production within the American avant-garde, “homeless movies” would thus seem to be a more apt descriptor, given the fact that home was first and foremost a problem for the NAC. In this cycle of films, home is only ever operative as a horizon, never as a foundation.

This chapter considers how homelessness functions in the works of the NAC as an index of the wide scale transformations to private and public spheres that occurred in postwar American society, a period of American life within which traditional conceptions

²⁷¹ I take this phrase from Ken Kelman who, despite viewing any effort at systematizing the films of the NAC as a direct contradiction of this film culture’s rejection of rational order, nevertheless identified two “pressure[s] for coherence” binding these works together: one aesthetic, “the exhaustion of film form by midcentury”; one spiritual, “the need for freedom in an increasingly restrictive world” (“Anticipations of the Light,” 23, 24). A more extreme refutation of attempts to characterize the NAC as a unified movement can be found in Shirley Clarke’s assertion that “The [New American Cinema] Group doesn’t exist, and never will” (quoted in Walter Ross, “The New Cinema: It’s Independent and Personal,” *Esquire* [May, 1962]: 36).

of the private and the public as stable, autonomous, and universal realms were swiftly and deeply problematized. More specifically, it positions homelessness as the primary medium through which anxieties about the “loss” of traditional private and public forms gain expression in the NAC’s films, and examines the correspondences these anxieties reveal between this avant-garde film culture and more popular cultural manifestations of this era, the latter of which frequently draw on notions of homelessness to voice conservative lamentations about the decline of private and public life in the context of late modernity. Yet this chapter also examines another, seemingly contradictory tendency at work in the NAC’s films, few of which are content to simply worry over the destabilization of such traditional forms. Indeed, homelessness also figures in this film culture as something more closely resembling a lifestyle or strategy: a transient, improvisatory practice of living consciously pursued and promoted by these artists in an effort to alleviate, or more actively dispense with, anxieties about the dwindling of private and public spheres. In such instances, the absence of normative home-spaces is framed as something to be celebrated rather than lamented, a hard-won achievement for artists working to cultivate decidedly non-traditional modalities of interiority and collectivity incompatible with suburbia and mass society, which could facilitate new ways of inhabiting the world.

These two opposing engagements with homelessness – one anxious and conservative; the other exploratory and generative – persist across the collective oeuvre produced by the NAC, indicating the profoundly ambivalent position that homelessness occupies in this film culture. In what follows, I seek to trace out the historical context of this ambivalence, while also addressing its political and theoretical implications. At the

same time that the NAC's films frame the "loss" of home as a highly threatening and disorienting condition foisted on the late-modern subject, I argue, they also embrace this loss as an enabling condition for elaborating alternative modes of habitation up to speed with the specific demands and constraints of late modernity. As a way of approaching these demands and constraints, I begin by analyzing how popular American culture of the postwar period, and particularly the cycle of films associated with classical film noir, utilized images of homelessness to evoke concerns about shifting configurations of private and public spheres. I then explore how the NAC's homeless movies overlap with, and simultaneously depart from, such conventional cultural forms. I do so by constructing a dialogue between two films crucial to this movement's emergence: Lionel Rogosin's influential early docu-fiction about homeless men living on New York City's infamous skid row, *On the Bowery*, and Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's landmark contribution to Beat cinema, *Pull My Daisy*. By juxtaposing *On the Bowery*'s anxious depiction of a shabby hobo subculture with *Pull My Daisy*'s jubilant ode to the Beats' itinerant spirit, I seek to underscore the novelty and significance of *Pull My Daisy*'s raucous disregard for then-conventional concerns about the "loss" of traditional private and public forms. Simultaneously, by attending to *On the Bowery*'s dramatization of the very real dangers that can follow from exposure and alienation, I also seek to temper *Pull My Daisy*'s exuberance about the absence of private shelter and public belonging.

Positioning *On the Bowery* and *Pull My Daisy* in this manner, on either end of a spectrum of responses to postwar transformations that was available to artists of the NAC, I then consider how the differing imaginations of homelessness presented by these films merge and clash in Jonas Mekas's radically ambivalent first feature, *Guns of the*

Trees (1960), which dramatizes Mekas's broader attempt to wrest some generative potential from this transitional period. Drawing on Edward Dimendberg's recent analysis of the distinctly late-modern "urban malaise" that developed in American culture coextensive with WWII to comprehend *Guns of the Trees*'s apocalyptic depiction of then-contemporary New York City, I argue that Dimendberg's historical and theoretical insights allow us to read this film's anxiety about sterile, alienating cityscapes as a symptom of the NAC's nostalgia for traditional private and public realms.²⁷² However, by turning to Hannah Arendt's theoretical ruminations on the deadness of "worldliness" and the vivifying form of "life" that flourishes in spaces and practices positioned outside or against the domain of "world," I then work to elucidate an opposing, progressive impulse in *Guns of the Trees*.²⁷³ This impulse can be discerned, I contend, in this film's recurrent – and not unproblematic – attempt to locate new and revitalizing forms of private and public experience in various social realms, activities, and figures that it imagines to exist "outside" the dominant life-world of the late-modern U.S. With the aid of Arendt's theoretical framework, I demonstrate how *Guns of the Trees* envisions such a homeless mode of living – one positioned outside or against then-dominant domestic and social spheres, and the normative lifestyle facilitated by such spheres – as the only viable option for members of a "new generation" endeavoring to make the uncanny terrain of late-modern America feel like home. I conclude by analyzing the different worldly and human resources upon which *Guns of the Trees* draws in order to imagine this homeless lifestyle, while also posing questions about its viability as an alternative.

²⁷² See Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Dimendberg, "From Berlin to Bunker Hill: Urban Space, Late Modernity, and Film Noir in Fritz Lang's and Joseph Losey's *M*," *Wide Angle* 19.4 (October, 1997).

²⁷³ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), esp. chs. 3 and 4.

III. Postwar Homelessness

If the concept of home harbors a clear pertinence to discussions of privacy and changing perceptions of the private sphere, this concept's relevance for studies of the public sphere is perhaps not as certain. The home's status as a material construct that delimits and shelters a zone of privacy is a commonly held (though by no means universal) assumption, as is this construct's ability to function as a model of interiority and the private self, or what Gaston Bachelard famously referred to as a "topography of... Intimate being."²⁷⁴ Yet "home" is an especially tensile signifier, one that frequently stretches beyond the confines of a domestic shelter to designate a more general sense of belonging, or a feeling of integration with one's surroundings or community. In his study of 1940s American cinema, *Power and Paranoia*, Dana Polan addresses this tendency by distinguishing between understandings of home as a space and as a sign, where the latter is "not necessarily limited to a specific locale, a specific building," but is something more closely resembling "an attitude—a way of perceiving environment..."²⁷⁵ "Home's values can extend outward," Polan observes, "through the stability of a job, the camaraderie of friends, through places invested with the succoring warmth of the home. Even public places are transformed into symbolic extensions of home values..."²⁷⁶ It follows that signs of homelessness harbor an analogous relevance to both private and public domains, signifying not only an absence of a material dwelling or a loss of interiority, but also a lack of social recognition and cultural integration. Statements and representations of

²⁷⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1958) xxxvi.

²⁷⁵ Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 253.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid* 253.

homelessness thus resonate equally well with experiences of shelterlessness and self-alienation as with those of marginality and superfluousness, or the sense of not belonging to one's surrounding, public world.

Ideas about homelessness were therefore particularly marketable within the context of post-WWII American society. Just as notions of private stability were complicated during this period by the postwar housing shortage, the rise of an unnerving suburban frontier, and the proliferation of new anxieties about surveillance, reification, confession, and atomic warfare, perceptions of the public as a realm of identity formation and collectivity were similarly challenged by a highly fractured postwar social landscape and the development of impersonal configurations of white-collar labor, mass culture, and urban space. Amidst such changes, the concept of homelessness achieved a striking level of currency in American social criticism and popular culture. It provided a highly flexible – and trafficable – narrative of rupture and decline through which the lived instability of the postwar period could be made legible, though in a necessarily distressing form. Sociological bestsellers such as *White Collar*, *The Lonely Crowd*, and *The Organization Man*, which draw on themes of homelessness to describe a postwar subject newly devoid of interiority, community, and stabilizing ideological systems, here intersect with popular formations in postwar American cinema such as classical film noir and science fiction, which sought to capitalize on the instability of this period by manufacturing images of transient anti-heroes set adrift in alien cityscapes without moral coordinates, or of excessively vulnerable psychic, domestic, and communal interiors perpetually threatened with invasion and expropriation.²⁷⁷ In such discursive registers, the

²⁷⁷ The significance of this theme in postwar sociology cannot be understated. On the first page of his introduction to *The Organization Man*, William H. Whyte describes the subject of his study thusly: “They

postwar period was envisioned as the era of a historically novel uncanny condition that resulted from the radical disturbance of traditional forms of private and public life.

Despite a longer history of critical thought concerning the decline of private and public spheres under modernity, popular imaginations of homelessness in postwar culture typically envision this period in terms of a sudden – or suddenly critical – breakdown of these spheres, a double loss of both shelter and belonging.

The dominant idiom through which anxieties about homelessness were articulated in postwar American film was that formulated by classical film noir. As a number of recent studies of noir by scholars such as Vivian Sobchack, Edward Dimendberg, and Dean MacCannell have emphasized, homelessness figures as a central problem in this film cycle, which is now understood “to encode a crisis of dwelling [specific to] postwar American modernity,” as Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland have astutely observed.²⁷⁸

[organization men] are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life...” (*The Organization Man* [Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002; New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1956] 3). David Riesman utilizes the concept of homelessness similarly when distinguishing between “the inner-directed person [who] could be ‘at home abroad’ by virtue of his relative insensitivity to others, [and] the other-directed person [who] is, in a sense, at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a rapid if sometimes superficial intimacy with and response to everyone” (Riesman with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953] 25). C. Wright Mills describes the condition in more urgent terms: “The uneasiness, the malaise of our time, is due to this root fact: in our politics and economy, in family life and religion—in practically every sphere of our existence—the certainties of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have disintegrated or been destroyed and, at the same time, no new sanctions or justifications for the new routines we live, and must live, have taken hold. So there is no acceptance and there is no rejection, no sweeping hope and no sweeping rebellion. There is no plan of life. Among white-collar people, the malaise is deep-rooted; for the absence of any order of belief has left them morally defenseless as individuals and politically impotent as a group. Newly created in a harsh time of creation, white-collar man has no culture to lean upon except the contents of a mass society that has shaped him and seeks to manipulate him to its alien ends. For security’s sake, he must strain to attach himself somewhere, but no communities or organizations seem to be thoroughly his” (*White Collar: The American Middle Classes* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; 1959] xvi). A related assessment can be found in Siegfried Kracauer’s epilogue to *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997; New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), in which Kracauer asserts that the breakdown of ancient belief systems in modern society has left man “ideologically shelterless” (288).

²⁷⁸ Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland, *Film Noir: Hard-Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 140. See also Vivian Sobchack, “Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir,” *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Jon Lewis

These analyses of “homeless noir” (MacCannell) are particularly valuable to considerations of the NAC, because they provide highly sophisticated historical and theoretical frameworks through which to view the transposition of then-popular concerns about the difficulty of dwelling into the realm of filmic representation. However, to apply the lessons of these analyses to the case of an experimental film culture such as the NAC, it is nevertheless necessary to revise the insights of these critics, given that their accounts of the postwar dwelling crisis do not engage the substantial reworking of problems of homelessness undertaken at the end of the postwar period by filmmakers affiliated with the NAC. Indeed, variations on this theme put forward by experimental and independent American filmmakers after WWII are strikingly absent from recent critical literature on homeless noir.

Sobchack’s innovative re-reading of this film cycle is especially pertinent for our purposes because of her interest in situating noir as an outgrowth of transformations to private and public spheres in the postwar U.S. She demonstrates that classical noir’s notoriously bleak outlook on the impossibility of dwelling needs to be viewed as one, particularly nostalgic response to the reorganization of private and public life that formed noir’s immediate historical context. Indeed, for Sobchack, the drama of noir turns on its inability to relinquish traditional models of home in the midst of a transitional period of American history that fundamentally disturbed such models, rendering both stable domestic shelters and nostalgic notions of the unified home front inaccessible, and instituting what she describes as an entirely “new American homelessness.”²⁷⁹

(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Dimendberg, *Film Noir*; Dean MacCannell, “Democracy’s Turn: On Homeless Noir” in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993).

²⁷⁹ Sobchack 146.

According to Sobchack, noir's anxiety about the decline of traditional private and public realms can be seen most clearly in this film cycle's obsession with the various anonymous, pseudo-public "quasi-places" that constitute its material premises: those "cocktail lounges, hotel bars, diners, roadhouses, and motels that spatialize film noir—those rented rooms or tables or counter stools that resist individual particularity and are made for transients and transience..."²⁸⁰ Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "chronotope," or time-space, Sobchack views these impersonal quasi-places as examples of a distinctly postwar chronotopic structure that she calls "lounge time," which entails actual, material spaces specific to postwar culture that, in the midst of the domestic and social disruptions of this period, became "charged with particular temporal meaning for the culture's life-world," or which came to encapsulate the broader process of historical transition that made it so difficult for inhabitants of this life-world to feel at home.²⁸¹ As Sobchack explains, the historical significance of the spaces frequented by noir's transient anti-heroes comes in the threat such spaces pose to the plenitude and security traditionally associated with the domestic realm and the purposive productivity of capitalist social spheres. Such spaces:

substitute for and fragment into 'broken' status the nurturant functions of... the home. They transport spatially contiguous and intimate familial activity (eating, drinking, sleeping, and recreating) from private and personalized to public and anonymous domain. They substitute impersonal, incoherent, discontinuous, and rented space for personal, intelligible, unified, and generated space. They spatially rend and break up the home—and, correlatively, family contiguity and generational continuity. [...] [They] also radically [transform] recreational time, making leisure more a condition to be suffered than pleasurably embraced. Indeed, leisure, as lounge time in the *mise-en-scène* of noir, is temporalized not as idyllic and regenerative activity... Rather, it is

²⁸⁰ Ibid 138.

²⁸¹ Ibid 147.

temporalized negatively as idle restlessness, as a lack of occupation, as a disturbing, ambiguous, and public display of unemployment.²⁸²

Disturbing traditional private and public divisions, as well as the gendered social positions and functions traditionally secured by such divisions, the fractured sites that constitute noir's mise-en-scène thus register, in a highly concrete fashion, the lived sense of shelterlessness and superfluousness suffered by Americans during this period, "concretiz[ing] an existential world in which... 'there is no place like home.'"²⁸³

In Sobchack's rubric, classical film noir *registers* the actual, lived experience of postwar homelessness by taking the various quasi-places noted above as its material premises. However, noir also *frames* the absence of home in especially cynical terms by utilizing specific stylistic practices, themes, and narrative structures that consistently represent the absence of a stable home-space as both insurmountable and unendurable, as the ground from which this film cycle's violent narratives emerge and to which they inevitably return. According to Sobchack, this particularly "perverse and dark" response to the problem of home in postwar culture is the product of classical noir's occupation of a somewhat impossible historical position mirroring that endured by America's homeless masses during this period:

Like the characters of noir, much of America was fixed, paradoxically, in a transitional moment—looking back toward a retrospectively idyllic world that could not be historically recuperated (even if it could be represented), looking forward... with a certain inertial apprehension of a probable dead end. [...] [N]oir historicizes in the most concrete manner the moment when the idyllic and 'timeless' identity and security of the patriarchal American 'home' was held hostage to a domestic future beyond its imagination.²⁸⁴

²⁸² Ibid 157-158.

²⁸³ Ibid 137.

²⁸⁴ Ibid 165-167.

Awkwardly stuck in this moment of fixed transience, noir's protagonists – like postwar Americans themselves – were left without access either to the previously operative myth of a stable home or an historically viable alternative. It is in this sense that Sobchack views noir's obsession with the impossibility of dwelling as representative of a broader failure of postwar American society. “[L]ounge time,” she asserts, borrowing once again from Bakhtin, “represents both the historical necessity and the historical failure to constitute the [new, postwar] ‘world on a new basis, to render it familiar, to humanize it.’”²⁸⁵

Sobchack's understanding of this transitional experience contributes substantially to analyses of the NAC, though it is also limited by her attempt to position noir's decline toward the end of the 1950s as corresponding with the resolution of the postwar transition. “[A]s the Eisenhower years (1952-1960) drew to a prosperous close,” she claims, “the country... learned to love the security state and the Bomb and... settled down—into what David Reid and Jayne L. Walker describe as ‘a cold torpor.’”²⁸⁶ Though this narrative accurately describes mainstream America's slow acquiescence to the frigid domestic and social norms that solidified as cultural dominants during the '50s, it nevertheless elides the ways in which anxieties about homelessness persisted in new forms at the margins of American culture throughout the subsequent decade. Stemming largely from the influence of Beat literature, then-emergent sub- and counter-cultural formations such as the NAC reiterated popular concerns about the loss or absence of home, while also dramatically reframing them. Following on the heels of classical noir, the NAC's films extended noir's use of homelessness to evoke the decline of traditional

²⁸⁵ Ibid 166.

²⁸⁶ Ibid 131.

private and public spheres, even drawing freely from noir's formal lexicon and chronotopic coordinates, to communicate the dangerous instability brought on by this decline.²⁸⁷ But because the NAC's homeless movies were produced amidst the process of mass settlement described by Sobchack – when suburbia, mass culture, and “the organization” had already been installed to alleviate the sense of shelterlessness and superfluosity suffered after WWII – the NAC's rehearsal of this homeless refrain also assumed a novel criticality at the beginning of the '60s. By persisting in naming homelessness as the defining condition of American life, the NAC thereby deemed then-dominant American society's new approximations of private and public spheres ineffective. To artists of the NAC, the spurious domestic and social norms then being promoted as the solution to postwar homelessness only served to exacerbate, rather than to resolve, this condition.

This critical dimension of the NAC helps to elucidate the curious ambivalence with which this movement confronted the apparent “loss” of stable home-spaces that occurred after WWII – an ambivalence that most easily distinguishes the NAC's homeless movies from engagements with this theme in popular cultural forms such as film noir. Indeed, while the NAC's films do worry constantly over the decline of private and public life, they also endeavor to reclaim this decline as a decidedly positive condition, or more precisely, as a condition of possibility for elaborating different forms of private and public experience capable of alleviating the feelings of shelterlessness and superfluosity that defined daily life throughout the postwar period. In other words,

²⁸⁷ It is telling in this respect that the independently produced noir *Blast of Silence* (Allen Baron, 1961) was included in the “Il Nuovo Cinema Americano” exposition curated by the producer, David C. Stone, for the 1961 Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, where it screened alongside works such as Stan Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) and Gregory Markopoulos' *Serenity* (1961).

what is especially intriguing about this movement's films is the ways in which they work to position homelessness as a remedy to homelessness, striving to recuperate the absence or inaccessibility of a stable home-space as the basis of an alternative lifestyle through which new forms of inner experience and social recognition could be explored, assessed, and negotiated.

The NAC's attempt to redeem homelessness turned on a double reversal of then-popular concerns about the absence of private and public spheres. Because artists affiliated with this movement believed then-dominant configurations of domestic and social life were inhospitable – which is to say, hostile to the forms of selfhood and communal expression that such spheres were traditionally intended to house – notions of rootedness and participation were themselves rendered suspect, just as one's evasion of suburbia and mass society came to be viewed as an achievement. Taking a page from the Beat culture out of which they emerged, artists of the NAC reframed the condition of shelterlessness imposed by postwar uncertainty as the basis of a vagabond lifestyle devoted to itinerancy and spontaneity, and valued for its capacity to produce highly vitalizing – yet also fleeting and unreliable – experiences of inwardness. Similarly, the sense of non-belonging foisted on the postwar subject by a newly alienating social world was also recuperated as the ground of a more active practice of disaffiliation, or the willful assumption of a marginal social position from which alternative forms of relatedness and collectivity could be elaborated, though in a necessarily tentative and precarious manner. While this movement did participate in the postwar period's culture of anxious discourse about the “loss” of home, then, it also departed from this culture,

actively relinquishing traditional home-spaces in favor of the more vagrant personal and collective experiences that elude or exceed such spaces.

The NAC's effort to redeem homelessness was certainly not without its problems. Indeed, this project brought with it a laundry list of disturbing consequences paralleling that of their literary predecessors and sometimes-collaborators. Along with aestheticizing poverty and glorifying a masculinized mobility at the expense of feminized domestic interiors, this valorization of homelessness was also complexly intertwined with the NAC's unfortunate rehearsal of high modernism's primitivizing tendencies: its flawed pursuit of spiritual redemption through various "pre-cultural," "irrational," or otherwise "abnormal" figures believed to harbor a supposedly ancient or eternal humanness that was nevertheless endangered by modern rationalism. As will be shown in more detail below, the NAC's failure to dispense with such modernist clichés was not secondary to its redemptive project but immanent to it, depending as this project did on access to an experiential realm existing somewhere before or beyond modernity, which Western culture has historically imagined to lie within or through the body of the other.

Without seeking to minimize such disturbing tendencies, it is nevertheless important to emphasize the necessity of situating this film culture's embrace of homelessness historically. Though problematic, the NAC's affirmative response to the absence of stable home-spaces in postwar America exhibits an important willingness on the part of these artists to directly confront the extensive reconfiguration of modes of habitation that occurred during this era: an endeavor that was by no means common at the time, and whose difficulty should not be underestimated. Indeed, the NAC's homeless movies assume a distinctly progressive character when viewed alongside the range of

nostalgic and alarmist representations of homelessness that defined popular engagements with this development in postwar American culture. This movement's efforts to recuperate homelessness as a means for revitalizing private and public experience should thus be understood as part of its larger attempt to imagine, and take up residence within, the "domestic future" that classical film noir was unable or unwilling to conceive. Though this project frequently found artists of the NAC running up against the limits of their historical position, its radicality must nevertheless be acknowledged.

We can get a better sense of the NAC's ambivalence about the "crisis of dwelling" that formed its historical context, and the problems that followed from its responses to this crisis, by turning to an analysis of *On the Bowery* and *Pull My Daisy*. Though numerous correspondences can be drawn between these works – their commitment to a small-scale, independent mode of production; their merging of fictional narration with *verité* stylistic strategies; their interest in capturing the "authenticity" of distinct, postwar American subcultures; their shared setting on New York City's infamous skid row – *On the Bowery* and *Pull My Daisy* display radically different perspectives on the condition of postwar homelessness, respectively exemplifying the NAC's anxious and celebratory engagements with this theme. Indeed, while Rogosin's depiction of the mostly alcoholic itinerant workers and homeless persons populating the Bowery was by no means a typical portrayal of homelessness for its time, as I will show, aspects of the humanist ideology and representational strategies that structure this film nevertheless reproduce important assumptions and conventions underlying conservative phrasings of postwar homelessness put forward in then-dominant cultural forms such as classical noir. *On the Bowery*'s resonance with such normative forms therefore

demonstrates the need to balance liberal celebrations of the radical “compassion” this film harbors for the “appalling collection of human catastrophes” it portrays with a recognition of the ways in which this very compassion – or this emphasis on the misery and suffering brought on by an absence of home – simultaneously re-inscribes then-normative concerns about the necessity of stable, traditional private and public forms.²⁸⁸

Conversely, *Pull My Daisy*’s attempt to casually dispense with such concerns stands as the cinematic announcement of the vagabond lifestyle embraced by members of the Beat Generation. This film, which was adapted from the third act of Jack Kerouac’s unproduced play, *The Beat Generation Or the New Amaraean Church*, and which features voiceover narration by Kerouac and performances by Beat figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky, thus does attest to the NAC’s disarticulation from postwar America’s dominant culture of dwelling. However, as I argue below, *Pull My Daisy* also demonstrates the political shortcomings of this film culture’s affirmation of homelessness by eliding any of the negative conditions that impoverished and homeless persons do endure. In an early attack on *Pull My Daisy*, Parker Tyler addressed these aspects of the film, criticizing its seemingly unselfconscious repetition of the tired, modernist trope whereby a privileged “poet-witness is set off against the common people and their poverty on grounds where he is, of course, an ambiguously welcome trespasser,” before denouncing the film as “an audio-visual paean to [the] fact” that the Beats’ popular success had rendered the familiar figure of the “outcast tramp-poet” into a mere “theatrical charade.”²⁸⁹ Seeking to both reiterate and to refute this assertion of *Pull My Daisy*’s obsolescence at the time of its production, my

²⁸⁸ Basil Wright, “On the Bowery,” *Sight and Sound* 26.2 [Autumn, 1956]: 98.

²⁸⁹ Parker Tyler, “For *Shadows*, Against *Pull My Daisy*” in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square, 2000) 110-111.

reading of this film confirms that its performance of homelessness does cling stubbornly to outmoded, modernist ideologies whereby social marginality is exploited as a source of authentic humanness, though I also work to demonstrate how this film's outdated politics are complexly imbricated in the NAC's progressive, future orientation, functioning as part of this film culture's attempts to envision a world that, at the time of *Pull My Daisy*'s production, had yet to be "humanize[d]" or "constitute[d]... on a new basis."²⁹⁰

IV. Sightseeing on the Bowery

Both versions of homelessness outlined above – the lack of private shelter and the sense of non-belonging – figure strongly in *On the Bowery* and each is affiliated by this film with a fundamental loss of humanness that it designates as the most devastating condition suffered by persons living on skid row. The first sentences of "Filming a Skid Row," a remarkable memoir of this film's production published by Mark Sufrin in the 1955/56 issue of *Sight and Sound*, speak to these aspects of the film. As Sufrin, who collaborated with Rogosin on the film's screenplay and other aspects of its production, writes in the lengthy but incredibly rich opening passage of this memoir:

The Bowery, the infamous street of derelicts in New York, is a syndrome of human blight, waste and decay; misused and shabby men living in a stale tenement city-confusion. At the turn of the century, the Bowery was a high-life district; it has long outlived its reputation, with only faded memories of that kind of vitality remaining. For years the street has been a refuge for the marginal people—the homeless and friendless, the alcoholic, the dope addict, the mentally ill, the prostitute, the aged, the petty thief, the uneducable and unemployable, the occasional railroad worker and seaman—a sociological underground that moves in and out of city hospitals and prisons, welfare offices, grinding jobs, domestic courts, seedy employment agencies, and all the grey, antiseptic smelling unprivate

²⁹⁰ Sobchack 166.

places. It is a sifting down to the bottom level—the sediment of a society that is inexorably carried down to this last place to exist.²⁹¹

Here, Sufrin designates the congeries of persons who populate the Bowery as representatives of a sociological category defined by lack of access to a stable private household. They consist, he explains, of the various unfortunate, diseased, or migrant figures who continuously flow in and out of the “antiseptic smelling unprivate” institutions established by the state to monitor, punish, and occasionally assist society’s most impoverished members, and who – when they are released or forcibly expelled from such institutions – have no other “refuge” but the street. The denizens of the Bowery are thus destitute of material shelter, a private place in the world. Yet this lack of material shelter also carries with it a symbolic marginality that Sufrin quickly equates with a certain *baseness*, relegating the “marginal people” comprising this “sociological underground” to a position at the extreme periphery or bottom of society, one described by Sufrin as “sediment[ary],” which is to say, the dregs, worthless, non-integrated, superfluous.²⁹² It is this exclusion from the proper domain of the social that MacCannell underscores in his recent essay on the fate of the homeless under capitalist democracy, a social configuration that steadfastly denies those persons without access to a stable

²⁹¹ Mark Sufrin, “Filming a Skid Row,” *Sight and Sound* 25.3 (Winter, 1955/56): 133.

²⁹² This affiliation of the homeless with baseness can also be inferred from the title of Sufrin’s memoir. As the historian Todd Depastino has noted, the widespread use of the term “skid row” in American culture after WWII corresponded with a dramatic shift in American perceptions of the homeless around mid-century: “The label [‘skid row’] originally derived from the skidways that loggers in the Pacific Northwest had used to transport lumber to sawmills. In Seattle lumberjacks had fashioned one of the liveliest main stems in America along the ‘skid road’ that led to Henry Yesler’s waterfront sawmill. When the migratory labor market declined after World War I, the generic term ‘skid row’ came into use, rivaling the more positively construed ‘main stem’ and ‘hobohemia.’ Whereas the latter terms had signified a certain swaggering élan associated with the hobo world, ‘skid row’ emphasized downward mobility (hitting the ‘skids’) and a constrained physical environment (a ‘row’ instead of a ‘stem’). In the wake of World War II, the older terms disappeared entirely. ‘Hoboes,’ who had once epitomized freewheeling American working-class manhood, had become ‘bums,’ confined to a few city blocks and shut out of the abundance and fulfillment that the postwar world had to offer” (Depastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 227-228.

material shelter the more crucial, symbolic “shelter under the dominion of the paternal metaphor,” or “the right to be included in society, criticism, fiction, policy – a place in the symbolic order.”²⁹³

In Sufrin’s framework, the persons dwelling along or atop skid row are without both such forms of shelter. Yet to Sufrin, this double homelessness seems to disturb not only the integrity of the social body, but the very notion of the human itself. The Bowery is a “syndrome of human blight,” as he puts it in the passage quoted above, a configuration of wayward men and women whose utter lack of vitality (the Bowery is no longer a “high-life district”) is perceived to be a symptom of some broader decline of humanness plaguing the modern world, which here appears to be focalized within the disorienting milieu of the poor quarters of the inner city (the Bowery’s “stale tenement city-confusion”). And in a manner that is consistent with the NAC’s broader investment in interiority, this decline of humanness is repeatedly associated by Sufrin with a tragic disturbance of selfhood, personality, or the soul: he goes on to describe residents of skid row as broken figures “too concerned with the fracture of their own personality” to fulfill a life of “normal ambition, responsibility or demands,” and as “shattered men who wish to paralyse in themselves with drink and senseless violence *what human beings desire most to keep alive*.”²⁹⁴ To be clear, Sufrin does not characterize the homeless persons he met while making *On the Bowery* as inhuman. On the contrary, he repeatedly stresses their humanity, or their status as living, suffering, and mortal human beings who are prone to disease and death, vulnerable to exploitation, yet also capable of compassion, honesty, and friendliness. It is thus not humanity, but *humanness* – as the true measure of

²⁹³ MacCannell, 287, 286.

²⁹⁴ Sufrin 134, emphasis added.

the human, or the capacity to transcend mere biological existence and pursue a life lived in accordance with man's innate spirit – that is here identified as the ultimate casualty of life on skid row.

Whether or not Rogosin was in total agreement with Sufrin, the latter's analysis of homelessness in "Filming a Skid Row" is reinforced by *On the Bowery* itself. For instance, several sequences in the film echo Sufrin's concerns about the absence of material shelter suffered by the homeless by demonstrating the vulnerable position of exposure that follows from this condition and leaves one open at all times to violence, theft, or incarceration. In keeping with this work's employment of the docu-drama format that had gained currency in American experimental film practice after WWII, wherein naturalistic documentary footage of a particular subject or milieu is incorporated into a more-or-less scripted, fictional narrative that is often filmed using various *verité* devices (non-professional actors, handheld cameras, improvised performances, etc.), *On the Bowery* both documents and dramatizes the dangers of exposure.

This can be seen as early as the film's opening sequence, which presents candid footage of homeless men being arrested for sleeping in public, as well as shots of others scattering from police scrutiny by ducking in the nearest doorway or hustling along to another block. Yet a pair of fictional scenes positioned after this opening reinforce the vulnerability that accompanies shelterlessness. These concern the film's protagonist, Ray, an itinerant railroad worker who has just arrived on the Bowery from an extended period of employment in New Jersey, and who is looking to spend a couple of days drinking and picking up odd jobs in New York before heading on down the road. On the first night that Ray spends sleeping in the alleys of the main stem, the suitcase containing all his

possessions is stolen, leaving him without the clothes and other valuables he could have used as collateral for a motel room or a bus ticket off the Bowery. On the second night, Ray is assaulted before being robbed. In the scene depicting this assault, which is among the more histrionic in the film, Ray stumbles out of a bar and down a dark street after a night of boozing while an abrasive, foreboding piano score plays on the soundtrack. A pair of medium close-ups reveal two anonymous thugs who observe Ray's drunken behavior and then follow him down the street. We cut to a shot of Ray pausing at a dumpster to catch his breath or vomit, his figure lit partially by a frontal, ambient light source, though he is mostly surrounded by shadow. As he struggles to stay upright, the thugs jump him, violently grabbing his neck and sinking a fist into his stomach. After the first punch is landed, the camera cuts to a high angle medium shot taken from the other side of the action – a cut that heightens the tension of the scene by producing a new sense of proximity in the viewer, while also creating a more drastic, visually striking contrast between lit and unlit portions of the frame. The thugs then quickly land a blow to the back of Ray's head that sends him to the ground where he sprawls out, writhing in pain.

While this scene offers a stark, brutal depiction of the violence that *On the Bowery*'s producers associated with skid row, the sequence that immediately follows Ray's assault further underscores their belief in the vital importance of material shelter. After a set of fades and an establishing shot to signify morning's arrival, we're taken immediately to a sequence depicting Gorman, one of Ray's acquaintances, waking in the relative tranquility of a sparsely furnished semi-private room in a nearby flophouse. As Gorman quietly shifts in his bunk beneath the chicken wire ceiling of this small, cubicle-like enclosure with his possessions resting safely on the floor and his body warmed by a

strand of sunshine entering through the window, Ray lies in a heap on a brick-paved alleyway, where he narrowly evades arrest after a group of men drag him away from an approaching cop. As this transition demonstrates, within the narrative economy of *On the Bowery*, even the minimal sense of enclosure and physical security provided by an impersonal rented room is preferable to the unpredictability of a night spent on the street.

More than just dangerous, though, being destitute of a private dwelling place is also depicted in the film as profoundly abject. Rather than providing images of homeless persons in ramshackle but functional shelters, or documenting the nightly commute of Bowery drunks who eventually return to a family home after a long day in the tavern, the film presents us over and over again with shots of men sleeping, resting, or lying unconscious on the street.²⁹⁵ Though such figures pepper the *mise-en-scène* throughout the film, a montage sequence depicting the first morning after Ray's arrival presents the most extensive documentation of this abject side of homelessness. Approximately fifty seconds of documentary footage – mostly short takes with fixed frames, though occasional slight camera movements, imperfectly focused shots, and underexposed images suggests the footage was taken candidly and off the cuff – shows a typical morning on skid row, cutting between numerous images of men sprawled out or curled on filthy sidewalks, curbs, or in doorways, covered in dirt and sweat, lacking anything resembling bedding and typically surrounded by rubbish, insects, or derelict articles of clothing. In one shot, a row of men lie on the dirt-grey sidewalk at the edge of a decaying brick building, covered in trash; in another a man sits upright but unconscious in an

²⁹⁵ A statement made by the film's star, Ray Salyer, during a filmed interview excerpted in the short documentary *The Perfect Team: The Making of On the Bowery* (2009), directed by Lionel Rogosin's son, Michael Rogosin, is relevant here: "And I'd like to clear up another thing about the Bowery: ninety-five percent of the men down there work every day."

empty wagon cart, a dark smudge on his forehead and a fly crawling on the cardboard beside him; a later shot presents a man who is missing his left arm and his right leg, shifting on the sidewalk with a crutch held awkwardly by the partial limb jutting out from his left shoulder; and another shows a man standing awake while wearing only slacks, an undershirt, and socks, who confusedly looks down to find himself missing shoes. Importantly, this entire sequence plays without any music or dialogue, featuring a soundtrack composed almost entirely of the dim, ambient noise created by a distant train running along the elevated track that bordered the Bowery at the time of the film's production. More than just an attempt to signify early morning stillness, the pairing of ambient sound with *verité* cinematography in this sequence is clearly intended to generate an awesome sense of realness, presenting a direct, unfiltered vision of homelessness in all its pathos and misery.²⁹⁶ In representing the reality of homelessness in this abject manner, *On the Bowery* resonates strongly with Sufrin's characterization of skid row as a shocking, even "frightening" space in which men become indistinguishable from the dirt, ugliness, and ruin comprising their material environs.²⁹⁷ What we witness in this sequence is the spectacle of humanity without humanness, or what one critic described as an "appalling collection of human catastrophes... men and women who have passed the point of no return."²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ And this strategy was certainly effective. In his early, influential review of the film, Basil Wright celebrated the affective impact of *On the Bowery*'s amateurish cinematography, which he believed to be "stronger and more effective than all the technical spit-and-polish in the world," and whose disturbing forcefulness he compared to "the terror of a reality seen by mistake from the corner of the eye" (Wright 98).

²⁹⁷ Sufrin 139.

²⁹⁸ Wright 98. Along with seeking to document the baseness of this condition, the film also suggests that the inability to secure some form of housing – whether an actual home, or a mere flop for the night – is positioned a rung below mere vagrancy to persons living on the Bowery as well. In a more humorous scene later in the film, Ray drunkenly attempts to ditch Gorman and head home with a random woman he meets

The representational logic of *On the Bowery* also corresponds with Sufrin's understanding of homelessness as marginality, and of the margin itself as a lifeless realm wherein man's spirit decays. Through specific strategies employed at the level of cinematography, acting, direction, and narrative, the Bowery's marginality is conveyed both in terms of its status as a peripheral space-time set off from the more modernized areas of Manhattan that surround it, and its status as a distinct subcultural territory, one inhabited by relatively likeminded persons possessing their own argot, gestures, and habits, whose behavior and interactions are governed by a loose – but operative – code of conduct. An important dimension of this is Rogosin's oft-discussed commitment to a mode of filmmaking "from the inside," wherein fictional characters and scenarios are developed in collaboration with actual members of a particular culture for the sake of authenticity, the latter of whom are then cast to play these scenes out in location settings with only minimal direction, and encouraged to "be themselves, to express themselves in their own manner."²⁹⁹ The film is thus riddled with all manner of ethnographic detail, including hobo slang (characters speak of "springing" a drink when "dry," or getting "peeled off"), demonstrations of practices specific to the Bowery lifestyle (for example, making a "hot shot" by straining the alcohol from a can of Sterno cooking fuel), and scenes depicting the conventions that organize that lifestyle (saving a sleeping man from arrest, sharing the wealth, etc.) Yet in addition to such details, the actual geographic locale of this culture also takes shape as an other world set off from the vital, functional

at the bar. Growing a bit perturbed, Gorman asks the woman for her address, then insults her by specifying: "What bush is it?"

²⁹⁹ Lionel Rogosin, "Interpreting Reality (Notes on the Esthetics and Practices of Improvisational Acting)," *Film Culture* 21 (Summer, 1960): 22. On Rogosin's practice of filmmaking "from the inside," see for instance: Wright 98; and Richard Meran Barsam, *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973) 240.

spaces of society, one which respectable citizens typically pass over – rather than through – on the elevated train that “shadowed the Bowery for so many years,” in Sufrin’s words.³⁰⁰ Indeed, the film opens and closes on a pair of establishing shots taken from directly beneath the imposing, tenebrous structure of this elevated train: a strategy of formal “rhyming” that is among classical narrative cinema’s most beloved methods for articulating formal and ideological order, and which here conveys a sense that the disturbing lifestyle shown to thrive in this particular portion of the lower east side of Manhattan remains safely limited to this specific region. Along with its use as a framing device, the film continuously returns to shots of this elevated structure that assume a more expressive function similar to that so frequently associated with the visual logic of film noir. In these shots, the darkness and impersonal massiveness of this “wormy old structure,” which Sufrin believed to be rich with symbolic meaning, is utilized to convey the Bowery’s status as an opaque and irrational “night-street,” one devoid of hope and standing in marked contrast to the transparent rationalism of normative society.³⁰¹

It is thus crucial that, in the only sequence of *On the Bowery* in which we glimpse the straight, workaday world, it appears as a high-paced, productive environment existing somewhere spatially distant from the elevated train. In this sequence, we see Gorman panhandling for drinking money on a bustling commercial street where men and women in business suits, uniforms, or snappy dresses walk across rather brilliant white sidewalks with purpose and direction as cars and buses stream by, carrying citizens from home to work and back home again. In the midst of this activity, Gorman slowly shuffles about, attempting – and mostly failing – to interrupt trajectories or to wrest attention from the

³⁰⁰ Sufrin 135.

³⁰¹ Ibid 138, 134.

anonymous sea of bodies that quickly rushes past. At the end of this sequence, we see Gorman walking back across town until he reaches the elevated structure once more, then continuing through the decrepit blocks of the main stem with their dirty buildings and cracked sidewalks. The first shot in this sequence that shows Gorman back within the space of the Bowery is particularly arresting: he strolls slowly down a nearly deserted block, passing a bum who lies unconscious on his back beside an abandoned construction zone, as if this man's eerily immobile body were just another piece of debris in this entropic urban landscape. When Gorman finally arrives at his destination, perching atop a bar stool before a shot of muscatel, the tavern is empty and his associates are nowhere to be found. So he sips his wine, then moseys on to kill the time left until the night's drinking begins.

In this sequence, the incredibly jarring contrast between the cleanliness and order of mainstream society, and the bleak, crumbling life-world of the Bowery, reveals how the latter's spatial separation from the normative social realm was perceived to be doubled by a temporal disjunction as well. In a manner that is consistent with then-contemporary conceptions of skid row as "a perverse holdout against the modernizing forces of the age," to quote the cultural historian Todd Depastino's recent study of modern American homelessness, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America*, this sequence depicts the Bowery as an archaic realm of urban decay, architectural ruin, and inactivity, an uncanny pocket of some premodern era existing at the edge of the modern city.³⁰² Much like the nightclubs, cocktail lounges, and cheap

³⁰² Depastino 229. Sufrin provides a typically poetic account of this temporal disjunction when he describes the "mosaic" of the Bowery as woven from "Ugly, blighted buildings that degenerated to ruin in fifty to a hundred years... Cracked sidewalks[,] cobbled streets with rusting, unused trolley tracks, [and] pawnbrokers with their mean, mildewed harvest," while also addressing "the phenomenon that can frighten

motel rooms that form the basis of what Sobchack terms “lounge time,” the Bowery is thus shown to be governed by an aimless logic of leisure that, as in film noir, is “temporalized... negatively as [a] public display of unemployment,” one whose inherent “threat to the very language of patriarchal and capitalist culture... dictates that its spatiotemporal boundaries limit and contain its [inhabitants] in what can only be described as a hermetically sealed—quarantined—social space,” one that is “not allowed integration with the culture’s traditional... spaces of domesticity and labor.”³⁰³ For Sufrin, the aimless temporality of this liminal social space existing somewhere between zones of domesticity and labor is inseparable from its evacuation of interiority. Because he affiliates humanness with an aspiration for normalcy, or with one’s adherence to “the whip of normal ambition, responsibility or demands” – in short, with conformity to the re/productive and purposeful temporality of patriarchal and capitalist culture – he therefore lists the sight of “bodies sitting, slumped, stretched prone in drunken release [with] nothing to do, nowhere to go” among the most “frighten[ing]” and “shatter[ing]” images to be seen by “the person who walks with ‘somewhere to go,’ who knows a home and a job,” yet who nevertheless enters (surely by accident) into this aimless and soulless space.³⁰⁴

In other words, this is no “hobohemia,” no space of joyous release from professional and domestic responsibility as the main stems initially established in American cities by a rising tramp “army” were known in the late 19th and early 20th

and shatter the person who walks with ‘somewhere to go,’ who knows a home and a job, whose horizons extend beyond a few city blocks—the hesitant, shuffling, reeling walk of the men up-and-down the street... and the endless parade of bodies sitting, slumped, stretched prone in drunken release—nothing to do, nowhere to go” (135).

³⁰³ Sobchack 158-59.

³⁰⁴ Sufrin 134, 135.

century.³⁰⁵ Indeed, *On the Bowery*'s vision of skid row as a dehumanizing realm set off from the respectable space of postwar society and replete with tragic figures, shocking behavior, and grotesque imagery corresponds in important ways with popular representations and perceptions of homelessness in post-WWII American culture – a period in which homeless persons, as the unmanaged excess of containment ideology, were typically viewed as either non-conformist deviants or as “a fascinating and disturbing anachronism, a throwback to another age before mass consumerism, suburban subdivisions, and high-wage jobs had liberated the American family from the ‘congregate form of living.’”³⁰⁶ As Depastino explains while analyzing the tensions generated by the homeless communities that persisted amidst the postwar culture of abundance, in the 1950s, “skid row represented an illegitimate subculture with bonds and allegiances separate from and resistant to those of the middle-class nuclear family.”³⁰⁷ By rejecting the nuclear family ideal and refusing to take their places as “citizen-homeowners” at a time when domestic-oriented consumption was the measure of democratic vitality, the members of this subculture were thus believed to be “potentially threaten[ing] not only [to] gender and family norms, but [to] national security itself.”³⁰⁸ Rather than framing homelessness as a matter of shelter, poverty, or structural inequality, then-contemporary social scientists defined it instead as a form of “disaffiliation” from the relational bonds comprising normative social systems; and rather than using this discovery as the basis for

³⁰⁵ See Depastino, esp. chs. 1-3.

³⁰⁶ Ibid 229, 230.

³⁰⁷ Ibid 228.

³⁰⁸ Ibid 232, 230.

a broad critique of the alienating conditions subtending postwar society, “disaffiliation” was understood largely as the result of individual failure or psychological damage.³⁰⁹

Thus, even though Rogosin and Sufrin’s attempt to produce an “authentic” and “compassionate record” of life on the Bowery diverges considerably from the sensationalist depictions of homelessness manufactured by conservative institutions at the time of the film’s production, *On the Bowery* ultimately fails to adequately dislocate itself from the broader culture of cold war conservatism within which it was immersed. By depicting the absence of stable, material shelter as a dangerous condition, while also placing the burden of social detachment on the shoulders of individuals and framing this detachment negatively as the result of personal affliction, *On the Bowery* ultimately reinforces the then-dominant belief that homeownership and social conformism constituted the foundation of personal success, health, and fulfillment. According to this film, there is no redemptive potential in one’s avoidance of a normative domestic environment, nor in one’s relegation to a marginal social space. It consistently denies any impulse to romanticize homelessness or attribute subversive value to this “illegitimate subculture.” The only chance for redemption the film offers Ray comes in the slim possibility that he might somehow escape the destructive gravity of this shadowy, underground social space: a possibility the film makes available in the form of bus fare to a stable job in Chicago, though confirmation that Ray has boarded the bus and overcome his self-destructive compulsions is never given. Indeed, the final line of dialogue – an ominous “He’ll be back” spoken by a peripheral character in the midst of a morning drinking session – reveals the filmmakers’ belief in the profound difficulty of ever truly recovering from the Bowery’s characteristic destruction of humanness. As Sufrin himself

³⁰⁹ Ibid 230-31.

states toward the end of his memoir, *On the Bowery*'s sole intention was to "[catch] something of the loneliness, the ignorance, the waste and futility of such lives, and [communicate] it to others..."³¹⁰

When situated within the broader context of postwar debates about homelessness, Frank and Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* comes into view as the perfect inverse of *On the Bowery*. Representative of the Beats' well-known rejection of the socially homogeneous and sexually normative environs of 1950s suburbia, which was itself part of their broader effort to critique and evade the dehumanizing conformism of cold war American society, Leslie and Frank's film embraces the absence of a stable, bounded space of material shelter in an effort to reclaim instability as the basis of an alternative lifestyle, while also promoting social detachment as the condition of possibility for alternative cultural formations. Much like Mekas, the poets and artists of the Beat Generation did not perceive any clear demarcations between normative configurations of public and private life in postwar America, even asserting that the domestic realm had to be located as the primary staging ground for postwar society's destruction of human interiority. As Kerouac's alter ego Ray Smith explains in *The Dharma Bums*, it was not the anonymous offices of white-collar bureaucrats but the "rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time" that were the "perfect expression" of "the middle-class non-identity" – a description that reveals Kerouac to have shared Ginsberg's anxiety

³¹⁰ Sufrin 139.

about the mass media's "extermination" of the previously autonomous private realm under late modernity.³¹¹

Because the Beats held spontaneity and immediacy to be the true measure of human interiority, their abandonment of such routinized domestic interiors for the romance of the road was spurred by the alternative modalities of intimate experience promised by the latter, whether these intimacies took shape as private reveries conducted in the solitude of nature, friendship offered by fellow travelers, or unconventional and unsanctioned forms of interpersonal communion. Leading artists like Kerouac away from the traditional spaces of social reproduction and into spaces perceived to be separate from dominant American culture (the highway, the Denver colored section, subterranean heroin pads, mountain cabins, Mexico, etc.), the Beats' embrace of shelterlessness was intricately bound up with their strategic advocacy for the benefits of social detachment. Rather than an insurmountable tragedy, alienation was reclaimed as an achievement, a position of externality cultivated as a way of removing oneself from the impersonal associative bonds governing dominant society, which was thus integral to the maintenance of human vitality.³¹² Though the Beats were not simply oblivious to the vulnerability suffered by those deemed superfluous, they believed that this willful divorce from the social offered the only viable strategy for formulating an alternative community, one organized in accordance with the inner needs being denied expression by dominant American society. In direct opposition to *On the Bowery*'s association of homelessness

³¹¹ Jack Kerouac, *Road Novels 1957-1960* (New York: Library of America, 2007), 307; Allen Ginsberg, "America's Nervous Breakdown: Poetry, Violence, and the Trembling Lambs," *Village Voice*, 25 August 1959: 1.

³¹² As Norman Mailer put it in his 1957 essay, "The White Negro," from within the deathly conformism of cold war America, it appeared that the "only life-giving answer" was "to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self... explor[ing] that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness..." (Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992]: 339).

with dehumanization, then, the Beats claimed that the demand for normativity governing both public and private domains of life was responsible for the decline of humanness in postwar society. In doing so, they effectively reframed homelessness as the only remaining avenue to redemption.

Although *Pull My Daisy* takes place almost entirely in the interior space of an artists' loft in the lower east side of Manhattan, the film's depiction of its pseudo-domestic setting, the actions that occur within it, and its protagonists' eventual departure from this space exhibit an immensely celebratory take on postwar homelessness. Within the austere, yet shabby domesticity of this loft, a railroad worker named Milo lives with his wife (a painter), their son Pablo, and an unidentified young woman who simply lounges in bed throughout the film. Representative of what Parker Tyler once called "the tenement-like homes the impoverished Beats have made, statistically, into their Waste Lands," the loft has mostly bare walls punctuated by the occasional unframed painting, hand-me-down sofas and wicker chairs imperfectly arranged into loose configurations, purely functional appliances and fixtures, and untidy floors and tables littered with dirty laundry, food, and other anonymous objects.³¹³ In other words, it bears a certain resemblance to the flop that Gorman temporarily comes to inhabit in *On the Bowery*: rather than some ordered, continuous, and hermetically sealed interior, this is a provisional and porous domestic space, where beatniks enter without invitation to recite boozy poetry or burst into musical performance, and where the aleatory music of the surrounding street filters in through open windows, along with the more mysterious "sounds of time" referenced in Kerouac's celebrated narration. In a manner that subverts normative representations of the postwar suburban "dream home" circulating through

³¹³ Tyler 110.

American mass culture at the time, *Pull My Daisy* embraces the disorder, unpredictability, and improvisation that traditional domestic interiors and routines are designed to contain, refusing this era's ideal of domestic harmony and habitualized familial intimacy to leave room for contingency, thereby setting the stage for a wilder sort of intimate relationality.

Pull My Daisy narrates the sudden emergence of such an intimate relational dynamic, while also revealing its masculinist dimensions. As noted in the previous chapter, the film revolves around a visit paid to the loft by a bishop, along with his mother and sister, which has been arranged and prepared for by Milo's (unnamed) wife. While the wife works to make the loft tidy and presentable to her guests, the motley collection of uninvited male artists who gather in the loft over the course of the day luxuriate in its messiness, flopping on the floor to drink and smoke, inquiring about the holiness of various quotidian activities and objects, and providing enough linguistic "goofing" and organ banging to continuously subvert the aura of propriety the wife struggles to project. During the majority of the evening, Milo tries to maintain a modicum of sobriety, making pleasant conversation with the bishop and telling the poets to behave themselves and be patient. But at the end of the night, pleasantries are finally dispensed with as Milo and a musician friend suddenly take up horns to engage in a proper bit of "blowing": a playful, impromptu jazz session whose profane rhythms send the bishop searching for the door. As an improvisatory collaborative artistic practice valued for its sensuous impact on both performers and spectators, jazz functions in this context as a medium of intimate exchange, an interpersonal practice capable of producing a *feeling* of aliveness, emotional intensity, and reciprocity in its participants, which the film's loose,

imperfect, and improvisational formal grammar also strives to transmit to its viewers.³¹⁴

Yet while Milo loses himself in this experience of relationality, embracing it as a welcome release from normativity, his wife interprets this break from behavioral norms as a tragic failure, declaring: “All this nonsense! All this time we should have fed them some food, we should have done ‘em some good, we shoulda – all that time you give ‘em wine and beer and give ‘em all these beatniks in the house.”³¹⁵

Here, Kerouac’s narration ventriloquizes the wife’s aspiration for a version of normalcy defined by the reproduction of conventions of domestic hospitality that, to the Beats, were mere extensions of a phony and restrictive middle-class propriety, the latter of which seemed designed to prevent one from doing such harmless activities as consuming large quantities of wine or reciting scatological poetry. In voicing this familiar version of the female complaint, the wife disturbs the playful, spontaneous atmosphere these men finally succeeded in wresting from the constraining domesticity she worked so hard to create. Yet all is not lost for the beatniks. Rather than endeavoring to generate this atmosphere again, they simply abandon the homestead for a night on the town, seeking to extract charges of intimacy from the unpredictable encounters and activities promised by the street. On their way out, we glimpse the idealized fantasy of vagrancy that motivates this departure, as Kerouac is found proclaiming with an intensely romantic air: “Let’s go. We’ll go somewhere; we’ll find something. Maybe we’ll play by fires in the Bowery...” Carrying the film’s suspicion of domesticity to its logical conclusion, these closing scenes thus project a counter-image of the representation of skid row formulated by *On*

³¹⁴ Norman Mailer’s description of jazz as “the music of orgasm,... a communication by art [that says], ‘I feel this, and now you do too,’” is only the most obvious reference here (Mailer 341).

³¹⁵ This and subsequent quotes from Kerouac’s narration draw from Steidl’s recent republication of Grove Press’s 1961 book *Pull My Daisy*, which includes an incomplete transcript of Kerouac’s voiceover. See Jack Kerouac, Robert Frank, and Alfred Leslie, *Pull My Daisy* (Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2008), n.p.

the Bowery, effectively recasting one's evasion of a conventional home-space as invigorating, a hard-won adventure for a group of poets willing to engage in a bit of class transvestism.³¹⁶

The condition of homelessness-as-marginality is similarly cheered in *Pull My Daisy*, as is perhaps clear from the film's embrace of the baseness (the dirt, disorder, and drunkenness) that *On the Bowery* inscribes as a shocking and grotesque reality of marginal lifestyles. Indeed, along with the critique of domestic conventions that *Pull My Daisy* advances, the Beats' disinterest in participating in the normative public world is expressed rather nicely in an early scene that hyperbolizes *On the Bowery*'s aforementioned representation of this world as a bustling realm of productive activity that simply races past Gorman, positioning the latter as an obsolete holdover from a bygone, hobohebian golden age. *Pull My Daisy* reiterates this basic relation while also redistributing it, choosing to cast the "normal" outside world as a profoundly hostile realm and to align its sympathies with the bums. Approximately three minutes into the film, after Ginsberg and Corso come falling into Milo's loft, cracking open cans of beer and toasting to each other's health, Corso glances out the window and, as the film cuts to a shot of automobiles passing in and out of view on the street outside, Kerouac's voiceover intones: "Look at all those cars out there. There's nothing out there but a million screaming ninety-year-old men being run over by gasoline trucks." A cut takes us back to Ginsberg and Corso sitting inside, where the latter places a cigarette in his mouth, crumples the empty pack in his hand, and tosses it off-screen as Kerouac concludes, "So throw the match on it." In this fantasy of beatific apocalypse, the postwar capitalist

³¹⁶ I borrow the term "class transvestite" from Eric Schocket's "Undercover Explorations of the 'Other Half,' or the Writer as Class Transvestite," *Representations* 64 (Autumn, 1998).

culture that had rendered bums like Gorman superfluous is casually discarded or set aflame. Rather than lamenting this culture's refusal to acknowledge their alternative values and aspirations, Ginsberg and Corso emphasize the freedom afforded by non-belonging, reveling in the pleasures of an early morning drunk as Pablo sets out for school and the rest of the world goes off to work. To paraphrase Sobchack, leisure in this scene is temporalized in distinctly positive terms, as a pleasurable and unsanctioned withdrawal from the inhuman temporality of dominant society.

Such explicit critiques of normative society are doubled by a more implicit dimension of this film, whose very setting can be read as expressing a similarly celebratory take on social detachment. As noted before, the improvisational exchanges represented and documented by *Pull My Daisy* are imagined to occur on the Bowery itself. Despite the fact that the film was actually shot in Leslie's Manhattan loft located at Fourth Avenue and 12th Street, or a good eight blocks north of the Bowery's conclusion at the southern edge of Cooper Square, the opening lines of Kerouac's voiceover reposition the action "in [a] loft that's in the bowery in the lower east side, new york." This change suggests that the Bowery's liminal location in respect to the normative spaces of domesticity and labor in postwar New York – its geographic position in the less-traveled and neglected space between Levittown and the white collar institutions located in other Manhattan neighborhoods, such as the financial district or midtown – was integral to these artists' attempt to represent an alternative form of intimate relationality in this film, providing the very ground from which *Pull My Daisy*'s alternative values and sensibility

were articulated.³¹⁷ Which is to say, though the two films differ considerably, *Pull My Daisy* nevertheless ascribes to the same logic through which *On the Bowery* distinguishes between normative and marginal social spaces, assuming that the Bowery's geographic separation from the middle-class life-world brings with it a corresponding cultural alterity – an alternative or subversive “atmosphere” that allows denizens of the margin to shrug off the behavioral conventions, values, and practices governing dominant culture and work toward an alternative lifestyle. The main difference is that, while Sufrin viewed the confused, shadowy atmosphere this “fervent night street” as a frightening departure from the transparent rationalism governing then-dominant American culture, to the Beats, the alterity and opacity of such peripheral spaces provided much of their allure. Indeed, much like Kerouac's infamous description of the “dark mysterious streets” of “the Denver colored section” in *On the Road*, *Pull My Daisy's* gesture toward the unpredictable, risk-laden, fire-lit streets of the Bowery invests them with an enigmatic aura of exoticism, thereby underscoring the Bowery's capacity to better facilitate these artists' exploration of the unstructured impulses comprising inner experience.³¹⁸

In the Beat imagination, the Bowery thus resembles what the urban sociologist Robert Park referred to as the “moral regions” characteristic of large cities: small, “detached milieus” dispersed throughout urban space wherein “vagrant and suppressed impulses, passions, and ideals emancipate themselves from the dominant moral order” and provide “abnormal” personality types with a “moral climate” in which their “peculiar nature obtains the stimulations that bring [their] innate dispositions to full and free

³¹⁷ Jack Sargeant notes the location of Leslie's loft in his informative discussion of *Pull My Daisy's* production history in *The Naked Lens: An Illustrated History of Beat Cinema* (London, UK: Creation, 1997), 14.

³¹⁸ Kerouac, *Road Novels* 161.

expression.”³¹⁹ Essentially referring to urban spaces inhabited or frequented by a specific sort of subculture, one whose inhabitants “are dominated, as people are ordinarily not dominated, by a taste or by a passion or by some interest which has its roots directly in the original nature of the individual” and is thus “more immediate and more fundamental” than the interests organizing other social groups, Park’s “moral region” also draws an intriguing connection between such subcultures, the concrete spaces they congregate in, and the domain of inner experience.³²⁰ Park suggests that the expression of those “impulses, passions, and ideals” comprising one’s “innate disposition” depends upon one’s “detach[ment]” from the spaces of “the dominant moral order.”³²¹ To Park, whose work was informed by Freud and who conceived the moral in opposition to the intellectual, such inner, moral impulses were “vagrant” not only because of their essential fluidity or non-fixity, but also because of their distinctly asocial character, or their status as “wild” instinctual urges that had somehow evaded the normative processes of socialization through which such passions are sublimated into socially productive behavior.³²² In Park’s schema, then, inner experiences are defined by their homelessness, or their essential incompatibility with the rational, ordered space of the social. Yet despite this, their cultivation is nevertheless said to be encouraged within small, contained locales punctuating the broader space of the city, or actually existing, material sites within which a “moral climate” can reliably be found to prevail or reside. The “moral region” is thus a home that is not one – an uncanny domain that is valued as such, sought out for its

³¹⁹ Robert E. Park, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment” in *The City*, Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967) 43, 45, 41.

³²⁰ Ibid 45.

³²¹ Ibid 43, 41.

³²² Ibid 43.

perceived ability to generate reciprocity between inner and outer spheres, or to provide a “stimulat[ing]” environment governed by chance in which one’s most primitive impulses are allowed expression in all their irrationality.³²³

Like Sufrin, Park viewed such uncanny regions with suspicion, affiliating them primarily with such sociological categories as “the poor,” “the criminal,” and “the defective.”³²⁴ To artists of the NAC, however, the vagrant atmosphere of such regions as the Bowery provided a vital release from the excessively rational environs of dominant society. In celebrating the Bowery in such terms, as a marginal locale possessing an alternative cultural atmosphere conducive to the expression of intimacy, *Pull My Daisy* gave cinematic expression to a distinct spatial logic that would come to serve as the basic architecture of the NAC’s films, as well as the organizing principle of their very lives and artistic practices. With the normative spaces and values of society deemed dehumanizing, Leslie and Frank’s film made redemption dependent on an *elsewhere*, a material or imaginary space existing outside late modernity’s dominant spheres of labor, consumption, and domesticity, and thus beyond the reach of the “centrifugal force” governing these spheres.³²⁵ The pursuit of this *elsewhere* thus led the artists of the NAC into spaces demarcated as liminal, peripheral, abandoned, detached, or foreign; spaces untraveled by the middle-class, not yet fully colonized by consumer capitalism, not yet “developed” in the name of suburban expansion or “renovated” in the name of urban renewal; decaying and neglected spaces that seemed ready to be repurposed for alternative modes of habitation, and whose porous architecture made them privileged sites of intimate encounter.

³²³ Ibid 41.

³²⁴ Ibid 45, 41.

³²⁵ Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema” in *Film Culture Reader*, 106.

By assuming the position of a topophile and mapping the marginal spaces that attracted these artists, while also analyzing the ways in which such spaces were used, inhabited, and cinematically re-imagined, an architectonics of late-modern intimacy can thus be discerned along the surface of the NAC's films, retraced or reconstructed across the collective *oeuvre* produced by this movement. However, the unstable, un-housed, and essentially vagrant forms of intimacy pursued and produced by such films suggests the need to resist any impulse to contain intimate space in a secure and stable "house image" or to imagine it as an enclosure that "concentrates being within limits that protect."³²⁶ Moreover, any effort to map the intimacies that organize the NAC's films would necessarily require a refocusing of the topophile's attention from the formal axis emphasized by Bachelard to that of politics. For, as *Pull My Daisy* makes clear, the inner experiences that artists of the NAC sought to wrest from – or generate within – regions such as the Bowery was as much a product of those regions' inhabitants as their shadowy mise-en-scene. Seeking to extract humanness from an impersonal world, the poets depicted in Leslie and Frank's film turn rather predictably to the more spontaneous and vitalizing environs of the poor, entering without invitation first into the home of a working-class man idolized by the Beats for his insatiable libido (the painter Larry Rivers portraying Neal Cassady, that heroic "cocksman and Adonis of Denver" whose sexual exploits are perennially celebrated in the Beats' prose), and second into the overlooked, risky quarter of New York City nightly appropriated by the homeless.³²⁷ Like Mailer's "white Negro" – that "new breed of... urban [adventurer] who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit [his] facts" – the "life-giving" experience of

³²⁶ Bachelard xxxvi. "Topophilia" is the name that Bachelard gives to his examination of the "images of *felicitous space*" (xxxv).

³²⁷ Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2001), 14.

outsideness pursued by *Pull My Daisy*'s hipster-protagonists comes not through solitude, but through a touristic journey into the spaces inhabited by a community situated as "marginal" within American culture.³²⁸

This particular distribution of the intimate is by no means a novel component of Leslie and Frank's film. At the time of *Pull My Daisy*'s release, the distinctly modern tendency to locate the other as a wellspring of human vitality even appeared to be on the wane. In an essay published in 1961 on "The Crisis in Culture," Hannah Arendt notes the long lineage of modern artists and revolutionaries who, since the emergence of the social in the 18th and 19th centuries, sought to preserve their newly discovered (or invented) inner selves from the de-individualizing logic of society by "escap[ing]" into those strata of the population that had not yet been admitted to the still-exclusionary domain of "good society" – what she calls "non-society strata" who were believed to retain "certain traits of humanity which had become extinct in society," such as the capacity for intimacy.³²⁹ Yet for Arendt, the existence of such redeeming strata had been jeopardized, if not outmoded, by the historical onset of mass society, which had effectively closed all "avenues of escape" by "incorporat[ing] all strata of the population."³³⁰ To figures affiliated with the NAC, the evident persistence of "non-society strata" in the postwar U.S. was both alarming and alluring: while this movement's protest against the dominant society was frequently voiced from explicitly anti-racist and anti-homophobic positions that sought to abolish the social hierarchy described by Arendt, the NAC's assumption that oppressed communities and subjects resided within the symbolic margins of the

³²⁸ Mailer 341.

³²⁹ Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance" in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1968) 197. An earlier version of this argument appeared as "Society and Culture," *Daedalus* 89.2 (Spring, 1960): 278-87.

³³⁰ Arendt, "Crisis in Culture" 197.

social also motivated their problematic valorization of such subjects as material reserves of intimacy, or depositories of otherness through which an intensely embodied *feeling* of escape could be extracted, however fleetingly.

V. Life in End Times

Few of the NAC's films are as excited about homelessness as *Pull My Daisy*. Though *Pull My Daisy* did not strive to produce a thorough representation of its socio-historical context, its purely celebratory depiction of postwar homelessness presents an image of this condition that contrasts markedly with the more conflicted perceptions of shelterlessness and non-belonging circulating through American culture of the 1950s and '60s. To Parker Tyler, the rather blithe tone of *Pull My Daisy* was one of its more disturbing qualities. In his aforementioned criticism of Frank and Leslie's film, Tyler attacks the latter's promotion of a carefree idiocy as an extension of the Beats' typically "euphori[c]" mode of existence, where euphoria, as "the antithesis of *angst*," entails a callous blindness to the anxiety-inducing aspects of modern life.³³¹ Though Tyler's suggestion that the Beats were entirely devoid of angst or anxiety is misguided, his insistence on the disconcertingly celebratory tone of *Pull My Daisy* nevertheless retains insight, as does his emphasis on the performative (or "theatrical") nature of the version of homelessness we encounter in this film.³³² Indeed, when considered alongside a poem like "Howl" or the more gloomy moments of Kerouac's novels ("After all a homeless man has reason to cry, everything in the world is pointed against him"), *Pull My Daisy* feels highly imbalanced, as if the critical side of Beat literature was simply filtered out

³³¹ Tyler 110.

³³² Ibid 111.

when adapted to the silver screen.³³³ In emphasizing the vitalizing experiences that these “outcast tramp-poet[s]” gained by abandoning traditional home-spaces and embracing marginality, *Pull My Daisy* completely elides the ways in which homelessness was also experienced by these artists as, alternately, a woeful absence of shelter or an oppressive state of alienation, exclusion, and superfluity.³³⁴ This negative dimension of postwar homelessness, which functions at the heart of the Beats’ rebellion against cold war American society, is merely glimpsed in *Pull My Daisy*, excluded from its zany portrayal of the “mad evening” had by this “heroic and bedraggled circle” (Frank and Leslie’s description) like the more explicit sexual references of the film’s original theme song, whose eventual “bowdleriz[ation]” was astutely attributed by Tyler to commercial acquiescence.³³⁵

As a figure that condenses the NAC’s profoundly conflicted relationship to late-modernity, homelessness is at its most coherent in the NAC’s films when it is ambivalent. And though this ambivalence does not appear in *On the Bowery* or *Pull My Daisy*, it determines the very form of Jonas Mekas’s *Guns of the Trees*, a sprawling excoriation of cold war America that revolves around the death of a young woman named Frances (Frances Stillman), and the effect her death has on her lover Gregory (Adolfas Mekas) and their two friends Ben and Argus (Ben Carruthers and Argus Speare Juillard). As I touch on briefly in the previous chapter, with *Guns of the Trees*, Mekas sought to abandon traditional narrative structure for a more improvisatory and intentionally incoherent form that he hoped would better embody the sense of disorder and uncertainty governing daily life in American society at the beginning of the ‘60s – a time that he

³³³ Kerouac, *Road Novels* 369.

³³⁴ Tyler 111.

³³⁵ Quoted in Mekas, “Cinema of the New Generation,” *Film Culture* 21 (Summer, 1960):14; Tyler 111.

describes, in an entry composed in his personal diary during *Guns of the Trees*'s production, as a "period of darkness" that had rendered the detached, omniscient perspective of classical narration inaccessible.³³⁶ The film's image track thus moves haphazardly between staged sequences dramatizing the new generation's existential dilemmas, poetic imagery expressing the alienating and liberatory dimensions of then-contemporary American society, documentary footage of protests, political clashes, landscapes, and urban architecture, and patches of blank, white leader that suggest an affinity with minimalist painting, while the soundtrack oscillates similarly between a grating, high-pitched score composed by Lucia Dlugoszewski, more pleasant, relaxing folk music conveying romantic or melancholic sentiments, and angry outbursts of poetry read in voiceover by Allen Ginsberg. Shifting constantly between different genres, tones, spaces, and times, and moving back and forth between the realms of fiction and documentary, *Guns of the Trees* is – despite its considerable dramatic failures – among this film culture's most significant formal accomplishments, a stunningly dispersed text that successfully jettisons many standard strictures of narrative coherence in pursuit of a murkier, messier aesthetic. As an effort to evoke the disorienting experience of daily life in a transitional historical period, this film's opacity therefore underscores the NAC's proximity to classical film noir, demonstrating how the latter's anxieties about the instability of late-modern American life are extended and transmuted by the former.

An important "Movie Journal" entry from March 2nd, 1961, "On Improvisation and Spontaneity," reiterates the connections that Mekas perceived between the messy aesthetic of works such as *Guns of the Trees* and the sense of homelessness suffered by

³³⁶ "Guns will not lift itself 'above' its material. It will have more to do with naming the areas of anxieties than providing solutions. This is still a period of darkness. I am part of that darkness myself" (Mekas, Diary, 30 March 1960).

the new America, while also revealing his attempt to discern a glimmer of hope in the latter. Here, in addition to attributing the seemingly incoherent, directionless character of then-contemporary improvisatory American art to a sudden and disorienting delegitimation of the old America's reigning mores and beliefs – one that had left members of the new generation “lost and shaky, searching, fragile, groping in an uncertain moral landscape” – Mekas also states that this precarious, vulnerable position of moral shelterlessness produced an unexpected gain for the new artist, yielding an immensely valuable “oversensitiv[ity],” or a state of heightened receptivity to the “distant, deep waves, and motions and voices and groans” emanating from inner experience: traces of some ancient core of truth and knowledge that Mekas, in a characteristically mystical manner, positions as the ground from which the new America's project of alternative world-building can begin.³³⁷ It is this renewed relationship to inner experience and the redemptive potential implied therein that motivates Mekas to reframe the shakiness and messiness of the new art as signs of natality, or of what he describes as the impending “birth” of a “new man.”³³⁸ Along with the profound uncertainty it registers, then, the disorganized aesthetic of the new America – a homeless form for a homeless generation – is simultaneously perceived to radiate with the potential for change, encapsulating both the anxious and exhilarating affects engendered by an historical period devoid of all stable ideological frameworks.

The homelessness experienced by the new generation does not figure in *Guns of the Trees* solely at the level of form, but in fact recurs in numerous manifestations at the level of content as well, functioning as a central trope through which a semblance of

³³⁷ Mekas, *Movie Journal* 27, 29, 28.

³³⁸ Ibid 29.

continuity is retained across the film's highly disparate segments. And though the "loss" of moral certitude is dramatized in key scenes, the new generation's shelterlessness is also attributed to a variety of other socio-cultural, political, and environmental phenomena that cannot be easily reduced to matters of morality and truth, but which nevertheless resonate productively with perceptions of this period as one of transition, vulnerability, and disorientation. Many of these phenomena are intricately bound up with matters of privacy and publicity, and particularly with Mekas's belief that then-contemporary iterations of private and public life were incapable of adequately sheltering the individual from seemingly omnipresent dehumanizing social forces. Along with the decline of previously-operative mores and conventions, then, Mekas's film also reveals late-modernity as a moment when classical perceptions of the public and the private sphere as stable, coherent, and rigidly demarcated realms are severely problematized or disturbed, if not altogether outmoded. As with Mekas's attempt to recast uncertainty as natality, *Guns of the Trees* works quite hard to develop an optimistic perspective on the sense of homelessness that resulted from this decline of private and public forms, as we will see in more detail below. But in order to consider how Mekas's film goes about this, it is first necessary to examine its depiction of the negative side of postwar homelessness.

In a manner that resonates with certain of Mekas's statements from this period about the value of private space, one side of this film's representation of the predicament of postwar homelessness concerns the actual instability of domestic shelters within the context of cold war America. Set primarily in urban spaces of Manhattan and more rural locales throughout New Jersey, Connecticut, and New York, *Guns of the Trees* does not venture into the new suburban interiors that Mekas assumed to be "disease-infested" and

constraining.³³⁹ But it does spend ample time depicting the pseudo-domestic activities of Frances and her friends, paying particular attention to the bohemian, inner-city pad shared by Ben and Argus. Looking a great deal like Milo's loft in *Pull My Daisy*, Ben and Argus's apartment is a welcoming domestic interior in which quotidian activities (amateur haircuts, playing with cats, potluck dinners, etc.) provide respite from an alienating outside world, while also contributing to the sense of vitality conveyed by the film. Despite moments of joyousness, however, the boundaries of this space are constantly revealed to be unstable. In the first sequence depicting the loft, for instance, images of Ben and Argus lounging around their home are not paired with banal dialogue or nostalgic folk songs, but with Dlugoszewski's air raid siren-like score – a discordant audio-visual join through which the couple's seemingly carefree domestic activities become permeated by a free-floating dread. In a later sequence, which follows footage of Ben and Argus at a political rally, we see them lying asleep in bed beside an open window, until Ben wakes with a start, apparently disturbed by a nightmare. As if it were meant to function as a vocalization of Ben's internal dream-work, the soundtrack features Ginsberg reading portions of a surreal and queer collage poem populated by movie stars, fleets of war planes, atomic bombs, beauty queens, and over-enthusiastic American soldiers.³⁴⁰ After a brief series of shots, we then hear Ginsberg denouncing the "paid smug college boys spying on [his] private life," before confessing to have "dreamed [that] J. Edgar Hoover groped me in a silent hallway in the Capitol." Immediately after this statement, we see documentary footage of a protest against nuclear armament, the first shot of which shows a young woman standing in a sea of people while holding a

³³⁹ Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Village Voice* 15 June 1961, 13.

³⁴⁰ An alternate version of the untitled poem read in this sequence of *Guns of the Trees* is published in Ginsberg, *Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties*, ed. Gordon Ball (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 156-57.

baby doll and a placard that proclaims, “THERE IS NO SHELTER IN NUCLEAR WAR.”

In this remarkably tangled sequence, clusters of anxieties about international aggression, government surveillance, atomic warfare, and the mass media all intersect to convey how classical conceptions of the private sphere had been rendered obsolete by cold war American society. Just as the overwhelming complexity of then-contemporary political relations slips in through Ben’s window to penetrate his psychic integrity, dissolving the contours of his inner self, the closing protest footage also demonstrates the absurdity of traditional notions of private shelter within the context of nuclear modernity. In a manner that gives the lie to then-contemporary fantasies of the suburban household as a stable, protective enclosure, Ben and Argus’s material dwelling place is revealed to be incapable of sheltering them from the outside world. Similarly, Ginsberg’s invocation of figures ranging from Mae West to Hoover and the anonymous “college boys” employed by the CIA serves both to reiterate more pervasive, paranoid anxieties about the “brainwashing” or soul-extermimating force of the mass media, and to denounce the very real invasions of private life suffered by American citizens after the rise of containment ideology, especially those persons whose sexual or corporeal identities could not cohere with the subject position delineated by then-contemporary privacy law.³⁴¹ Through a series of specific formal and narrational strategies including the construction of fictional scenes representing the emotional unrest of the new generation, the juxtaposition of scenes of domestic repose with documentary footage of social unrest, and the pairing of such domestic scenes with foreboding, alarming, or “obscene” sonic

³⁴¹ On brainwashing, see for instance the recent special issue “On Brainwashing: Mind Control, Media, and Warfare,” Grey Room 45 (Fall, 2011).

elements, *Guns of the Trees* continuously performs – while simultaneously agonizing over – the destabilization of the traditional “fantasy of privacy as a stable and self-evident concept” that occurred contemporaneous with this film’s production.³⁴² This historical “loss” of privacy is thus consciously positioned by Mekas as a structuring dilemma of *Guns of the Trees*. When Ben is later found intoning “I want to go home and have cookies in dull kitchens and glasses of milk,” the image of the stable, traditional home-space invoked in this nostalgic reverie is meant to feel unattainable.

The stress that *Guns of the Trees* exhibits in the face of the new generation’s shelterlessness is not solely evident in its depiction of spaces and activities conventionally perceived to be private, but also in its representation of the late-modern American public world. Mekas’s film is one of the only works of the NAC to directly confront the newly bureaucratized institutions of white-collar labor analyzed so extensively in contemporaneous works of social criticism such as *White Collar* and *The Organization Man*, for instance. Throughout the film, fictional scenes depicting Ben racing to a job interview beneath the repetitive, standardized lighting of an excessively rationalized office building, Argus working as a secretary in an antiseptic, white-walled office where women sit separated from each other by broad desks and stacks of paper, or a pair of strange, lifeless mimes donning business garb and white face paint while weeping in a cabbage field reveal postwar spheres of labor to be impersonal, sterile, and phony, governed by a dehumanizing concern for money and populated by what Ginsberg

³⁴² Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* xiii.

refers to derogatorily as “owners with obsession on property and the vanishing selfhood.”³⁴³

The public world’s dehumanizing effects are also attributed by *Guns of the Trees* to the material composition of New York City itself, which is frequently figured in the film as a mute and unfeeling mechanism – a rigid, artificial configuration of concrete, glass, iron, and stone whose strictly ordered architecture and monumental scale actively inhibits individual expression. Along with scenes depicting the estranging, anonymous dynamic of city streets and the film’s recurrent return to documentary images of urban unrest (its chaotic representation of clashes between protesters and the police), one particularly striking sequence demonstrates Mekas’s use of urban architecture to articulate anxieties about late-modernity’s eradication of selfhood. Filmed in the early morning in downtown Manhattan, this sequence shows Gregory walking alone on an empty street lined by tall buildings – a tiny figure beneath a monumental cityscape who then collapses dramatically to the street as the camera tilts jerkily up the face of a skyscraper on the far side of Gregory’s body before pausing in a low-angle shot of the top portion of this building, which seems to loom in the distance. Here, the imposing giganticism of urban architecture seems to overwhelm and exceed Gregory’s merely human frame, as if the impersonal scale of the city simply left no room for the human organism. Along with war, bureaucracy, and mass communications, then, the city itself should be counted among the “huge machinery” Mekas believed to be “encroaching upon [man’s] personal being” in the context of postwar America.³⁴⁴

³⁴³ An excerpt from Ginsberg’s 1957 poem “Death to Van Gogh’s Ear!,” printed in Ginsberg, *Selected Poems 1947-1995* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

³⁴⁴ Mekas, “Notes” 103.

More than simply impersonal, however, New York is imagined in this film in nearly apocalyptic terms. In keeping with Mekas's belief that the postwar period was witnessing the "death" of Western civilization, *Guns of the Trees* frames its urban setting as a crumbling, decrepit wasteland or ruin, as if it were a materialization of the "dramatic end of the Christian Era."³⁴⁵ Similar to the narrative construction of *On the Bowery*, this framing effect is achieved through the placement of rhyming scenes in the opening and closing sequences of the film. Shot in a junkyard somewhere in the Bronx, these scenes show Gregory milling about amidst ruined engines and towering stacks of car frames, pondering ambiguous industrial debris, gazing across an expanse of water at the high-rise buildings in the distance, or conversing with a damaged old sailor. Importantly, each of these scenes feature portions of Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra," an intensely critical reflection on the dehumanizing effects of modernization that begins by evoking melancholy views of a littered railroad yard bordered by a "tin can banana dock" and "box house hills," and which goes on to narrate an encounter with the dead carcass of a sunflower covered in "that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad/skin, that smog of cheek, that eyelid of black/mis'ry, that sooty hand or phallus or protuber-/ance of artificial worse-than-dirt—industrial—/modern—all that civilization spotting your crazy golden crown..."³⁴⁶ In such charged poetic imagery, the waste and pollution of urban-industrial society, along with the uninspired, rationalized design of mass-produced suburban housing, are made to stand in for the broader wreckage of Western modernity, the latter of which is blamed not only for the destruction of nature but also for damaging

³⁴⁵ Mekas, "Where Are We" 21, 19.

³⁴⁶ Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1956), 35, 36.

the “beautiful golden [sunflower]” comprising the human soul.³⁴⁷ Emphasizing Ginsberg’s sweeping indictment of “civilization,” the cinematography in these two scenes returns frequently to shots that frame decaying rubbish in the foreground with broader expanses of urban space visible in the background, even panning in an important shot from a heap of trashed automobile parts across a small body of water with smokestacks and buildings visible on the horizon, before resting on a close-up of Gregory whose concerned face is seen in profile with ambiguous and banal high-rises looming behind him, solemn buildings that are evocative of Lewis Mumford’s famous description of New York’s Stuyvesant Town as an “unrelieved nightmare” of “Police State” regimentation and uniformity, an architectural construct “mechanically conceived and mechanically executed, with the word ‘control’ implicit in every aspect of the design.”³⁴⁸ The horizontal slide of the panning camera in this shot links the nightmarish architecture of the late-modern city metonymically to the junkyard, thereby implicating Gregory’s urban surroundings in the existential anguish he suffers. In such instances, *Guns of the Trees* can be said to provide a prime example of what Mekas would go on to describe as the early, critical period of the NAC, a moment prior to the underground’s pursuit of a purely joyous “art of light” in which members of the NAC used film to “[mirror] the dirty cities, the black dailiness [sic]” comprising their life-world.³⁴⁹ What is the significance of this representation of the city?

Though Mekas’s periodization here is not meant to be exhaustive, it does resonate in important ways with other pessimistic depictions of urban space in the early films of the NAC. Despite Paul Arthur’s claim that post-WWII American avant-garde film

³⁴⁷ Ginsberg, *Howl* 38.

³⁴⁸ Quoted in Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 16-17.

³⁴⁹ Mekas, “Where Are We” 21.

exhibits a “surprisingly affirmative, if not outright exultant” attitude toward city life, the NAC’s exultations of the city, when they appear at all, are most often tempered by an acute anxiety about the impersonality and alienation subtending urban life in the context of postwar America.³⁵⁰ The social isolation, existential angst, and racial discrimination suffered by Benny, Lelia, and Hugh in *Shadows*; the endless stream of vapid or violent spectacles witnessed in and around Los Angeles by Judith in *The Savage Eye*; the heartless destruction of historic San Francisco neighborhoods critiqued in *Lemon Hearts*; the documentation of New York City police violence in *Sunday*; the more pervasive, structural violence endured by African American communities in *The Cool World*; the lifelessness and pollution of urban space as imagined in *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* – such examples reveal this film culture’s concerns about the profound difficulty of residing within the postwar American metropolis.

The NAC’s exploration of the darker dimensions of urban life was not anomalous in the context of postwar America. Indeed, though Mekas framed this movement’s critical representation of the urban environment as a distinctly counter-cultural gesture, it was actually an extension of far more general anxieties about urban space that Edward Dimendberg has recently identified as a constitutive facet of late-modern American culture. As Dimendberg has shown in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, American culture of the 1940s and ‘50s witnessed the appearance of a profoundly bleak, melancholy urban aesthetic that contrasts markedly with the romantic odes to the metropolis put forward by early modernism, and which Dimendberg believes to be exemplified by classical film noir. Unlike the celebrated city symphony films and utopian

³⁵⁰ Paul Arthur, “The Redemption of the City,” *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2005) 47.

accounts of urban modernity articulated during the 1920s and '30s – within which the city appears as “a fantasy domain of speed, dynamic machine production, new perspectives on quotidian realities, or technological precision” – during the '40s and '50s, a diverse range of artists, social critics, and theorists advanced a highly somber perspective on the late-modern American city, characterizing the latter as “a coldhearted and treacherous mechanism more likely to provoke fear and awe.”³⁵¹ Revealing the parallels that exist between this new “urban malaise” and the postwar privacy crisis charted by Deborah Nelson, Dimendberg also shows that, for anti-urban critics and artists of the late-modern period, the primary threat posed by the city was no longer a matter of moral dissolution, as in earlier strands of anti-urban thought, but of dehumanization.³⁵² “After 1939,” he writes, “the danger increasingly addressed by cultural and intellectual practitioners was... *the potential loss of individual identity* and the growing power of a technological society organized by new spatial forms and the mass media.”³⁵³

Dimendberg's account of the material processes responsible for the emergence of this new urban malaise provides valuable insight into the NAC's concerns with homelessness. According to Dimendberg, this anti-urban aesthetic emerged in response to a “fundamental break” in historical organizations of city space that took shape in the U.S. over the course of the 1940s and '50s.³⁵⁴ The range of socio-cultural transformations that occurred during this period, from the construction of new highway systems and suburban communities to the popularization of television and the unprecedented architectural destruction brought on by urban renewal programs, produced “rapid and unprecedented

³⁵¹ Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 14.

³⁵² Ibid 110. Dimendberg also discusses this distinctly late-modern “urban malaise” in his earlier essay, “From Berlin to Bunker Hill.”

³⁵³ Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 14, emphasis added.

³⁵⁴ Ibid 9.

changes in the built environment,” Dimendberg explains, which radically disturbed traditional practices of navigating and inhabiting the city.³⁵⁵ The period of late modernity is here defined by the dramatic decline of urban centrality, or the historical supersession of traditional, humanist organizations of urban space affiliated with the Renaissance and designed with “regard for the corporeal and aesthetic experience of those who navigate it” by contemporary, “abstract” spatial forms affiliated with the industrialized city and designed primarily for “the realization of specific economic ends, social policies, or technological functions.”³⁵⁶ Instead of providing an ordered, proportionate, and unified environment capable of functioning, in Paul Zucker’s terms, as “a psychological parking place” while also facilitating the expression and maintenance of collective experience, the dispersed space and gigantic scale of the late-modern American city seemed to have simply excised the human figure and severed all substantive social and worldly relations.³⁵⁷

In Arendtian terms, the transformation of city space analyzed by Dimendberg can be read as one particularly disorienting facet of a broader reorganization of worldliness that Arendt posits as the material backdrop of modern social practices. Indeed, Dimendberg’s insistence that discussions of “space” entail both material “forms of the built environment” (buildings, streets, districts, etc.) *and* the “range of attitudes, behaviors, and shared interpretations” that take shape within and around such forms resonates productively with Arendt’s notion of worldliness.³⁵⁸ The designation “world” is not only extended by Arendt to the “environment of things” that stands between and

³⁵⁵ Ibid 8.

³⁵⁶ Ibid 104.

³⁵⁷ Quoted in *ibid* 103.

³⁵⁸ Ibid 99.

around humans, but to the shared “customs and habits of intercourse” that such things give rise to as well.³⁵⁹ Arendt thus attributes worldliness to the material structures, use objects, and cultural products created through human fabrication as well as to cultural behaviors and conventions, or the “deeds and facts and events and patterns of thoughts or ideas” that form the fabric of common sense.³⁶⁰ The function of this “human artifice” is nevertheless more specific than that of space. As Arendt states repeatedly throughout *The Human Condition*, the things and customs of the world have the function of providing a home for humans during their time on earth: they serve “to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man” by providing a durable man-made environment that “stabiliz[es] human life,” offsetting the endless change and cyclical temporality of natural life processes while also providing a reliable “in-between” for human activities, a commonly shared public realm that brings individuals into objective relations and establishes their subjective position, thus allowing them to verify experiences and articulate their uniqueness.³⁶¹

Resonating in certain respects with Arendt’s narrative about the decline or “loss” of worldliness that followed from the rise of modern society, the violent destruction/reconstruction of the late modern city charted by Dimendberg, and the traumatic disorganization of traditional social practices, cultural customs, and experiential modalities this process entailed, should be counted among the concrete historical developments responsible for the pervasive experiences of non-belonging, uprootedness, and loneliness that Arendt believed to have achieved the status of mass

³⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition* 94.

³⁶⁰ Ibid 95.

³⁶¹ Ibid 136, 137, 52.

phenomena in postwar society.³⁶² When late-modern urban transformations are approached in this manner, as material causes of a broader condition of world-alienation, we gain a deeper understanding of Dimendberg's frequent references to the perpetual homelessness of film noir's protagonists. Much like the more general anxieties expressed in then-contemporary urban criticism about the increasing homelessness of modern man, these protagonists' "inability to dwell comfortably anywhere" encapsulates film noir's characteristic blend of nostalgia and cynicism: its perception of the postwar period as a moment of crisis characterized by the degeneration of traditional configurations of domestic life and a parallel loss of worldliness, both of which are typically represented as unendurable.³⁶³

The particular iteration of world-alienation that we encounter in classical noir intersects in important ways with the condition of homelessness subtending the films of the NAC. As is demonstrated by the apocalyptic representation of New York City in *Guns of the Trees*, Mekas was also plagued by anxieties about the loss of worldliness during the period of this film's production. Moreover, just as Mekas's representation of New York as an impersonal and inhospitable environment draws on decidedly *noirish* stylistic strategies for communicating psychical and emotional disturbances through abstracted urban forms, *Guns of the Trees*'s consistent disruption of its characters'

³⁶² In Arendt's theoretical framework, the rise of modern society is said to result in a corresponding degeneration of worldliness, with the durability of the human artifice progressively eroded by modernity's emphasis on essentially futile forms of labor (which leave no trace) and world-devouring processes of consumption (which destroy materials and use-objects by emphasizing their functionalism, or their capacity to nourish human life). Though Dimendberg's narrative about the emergence of abstract space is highly distinct, it also corresponds in important ways with that of Arendt. It is worth noting, for instance, that both these thinkers track these processes back to the industrial revolution (see Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 99-108; Arendt, *The Human Condition* 124). Also relevant here is Dimendberg's emphasis on the increasing functionalization of city space after the advent of the industrialized metropolis, or the city's division into separate regions demarcated to fulfill basic functions (shopping centers, spaces of leisure, housing developments, etc.) rather than to facilitate the stabilization of identity or the emergence and persistence of community (Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 102-03).

³⁶³ Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 7.

attempts to “flee from the ravages of [their] disenchanting urban world” and regain historically outmoded configurations of domesticity and community – whether in pastoral settings such as river banks, lake fronts, and woodlands or small social gatherings with friends and earnest folk musicians – also seems to reiterate noir’s fatalistic lamentations over the impossibility of accessing a stable refuge from late modernity.³⁶⁴

One scene poignantly expresses Mekas’s belief that all previously existing “outsides” of modernity had been thoroughly problematized, incorporated, or obliterated by the new realities of the postwar era. Forty-eight minutes into the film, we see Ben walking aimlessly over a criss-crossing set of train tracks as a version of “Nine Hundred Miles” (a folk song narrated from the perspective of a tramp who is “nine hundred miles from [his] home”) plays on the soundtrack. Lacking home and direction, Ben recounts a conversation with a friend who, upon being asked to propose a “way out” of their confusion, responds with an answer that is not an answer: “What is the way out for an asp tree or an apple?” Situated precariously in a space of flux and transit, Ben is nevertheless stuck like some piece of passive matter, unable to escape the uncertainty of late-modern life because he is incapable of conceiving the existence of a stable, locatable elsewhere. With both public and private spheres of life penetrated by technological rationality, and both natural and domestic spaces of refuge no longer capable of providing adequate shelter, Ben’s position here resembles that attributed by Sobchack to the protagonists of film noir: both are “fixed... in a transitional moment,” unable to recuperate outmoded configurations of home or to imagine a new modality of habitation more suitable to their historical predicament.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ Ibid 7.

³⁶⁵ Sobchack 165.

Despite such correlations between these two film cycles, the NAC's films also diverge in important respects from the representations of postwar homelessness that we encounter in film noir. After all, unlike noir's typical anti-hero, Ben does not "[opt] for death" when faced with difficulty of imagining a new domestic future.³⁶⁶ *Guns of the Trees* marks its difference from classical noir by holding the pessimism embodied by Frances together with the optimism symbolized by Ben and Argus's relationship. For in keeping with Mekas's belief that uncertainty was closely linked to natality, Argus is revealed to be with child, a secret "conspirator in a plot of a new man." By seeking to discern an element of natality in the "darkness" of late-modern American culture, *Guns of the Trees* swerves from the conservative and cynical trajectories of classical noir. It can thus be understood as an effort to correct noir's "historical failure to constitute the 'world on a new basis, to render it familiar, to humanize it,'" so long as we also acknowledge that this project of humanization is not fully completed in Mekas's film.³⁶⁷ As the critic Joseph Freeman has observed, the success of *Guns of the Trees* is that it "[catches]... the outline of [the] new world" being ushered in by members of the new generation, rendering the new America as a mere horizon, a potential for change that has not yet materialized as a stable, cohesive entity.³⁶⁸ *Guns of the Trees* is thus less concerned with working to create a truly hospitable home-space, than with reframing the decline of what Freeman terms the "old order" – those for whom newness signifies "the end of things" – as the ground from which a new beginning could emerge. Which is to say, Mekas's film invests redemptive potential in the very loss of worldliness lamented by classical noir.

³⁶⁶ Ibid 166.

³⁶⁷ Ibid 166.

³⁶⁸ Joseph Freeman, "Awakening of Spring: 'Guns of the Trees,'" *Film Culture* 25 (1962): 27, emphasis added.

Reiterating in a more radical manner *Pull My Daisy*'s attempt to reclaim non-belonging as an opportunity for elaborating new intimacies, *Guns of the Trees* attempts to envision the decay of the established human artifice – the passing-into-history of previously-operative, “traditional” configurations of worldliness – as the condition of possibility for alternative world-formation, or for rebuilding the world in a more intimate and vitalizing form. For the “new order” represented in this film, Freeman explains, “the new is not the end of things, but the beginning...”³⁶⁹

We can get a better sense of the difference between the NAC and film noir by turning to another railroad scene in which the condition of homelessness invoked by the decline of the established world is shown to yield a distinct, vitalizing energy.

Approximately sixteen minutes into the film, we come to the overgrown field at the edge of a rail yard that I discuss briefly in my previous chapter, in which Ben and Argus are found killing time as “Little Birdie” plays on the soundtrack. When the couple walks to an empty Southern Pacific freight car sitting unused at the edge of the yard, Ben enacts a playful performance of his own homelessness, climbing in and around the car as if he were freighthopping, then waving goodbye and pointing off into the distance at some imagined *elsewhere*. Though no stable, material “outside” appears here, an instance of intimate exchange still occurs. At the level of content, Ben and Argus are allowed to momentarily relinquish their existential woes and engage in a playful, improvised interaction that can only be described as heart warming, conveying what one critic referred to as the “joyously human” sense of “spontaneity” that seems to radiate from Mekas’s depictions of this couple’s quotidian interactions, whether these occur within the porous walls of their pseudo-domestic loft, at a folk music performance in a subcultural

³⁶⁹ Ibid 29.

book store, or on a playground populated by young children.³⁷⁰ And as we saw in the previous chapter, the intimate effect generated by such sequences is heightened by the use of shaky, imprecise camerawork, a pair of quick jump-cuts, and “warm,” rough-hewn folk music to intensify the affective immediacy of the sequence, producing a palpable feeling of “being there” that stirs the intimate recesses of the viewer.

The naturalization of the cinematic apparatus implicit in this ideal of “directness” is echoed within the *mise-en-scene* as well, where a mechanized, urban-industrial setting is made to appear surprisingly organic. When we first see the aforementioned freight car, for instance, it appears in the background of a long shot taken with the camera positioned in the field bordering the rail yard. The foreground of the frame is filled with weeds, plants, and wildflowers, and toward the end of the shot, a butterfly even flutters across the screen. Immediately after Ben’s hobo performance, we again find the couple lingering in a largely natural expanse of greenery. The ordering of this sequence of shots, which sandwiches images of the rail yard between more pastoral imagery of the surrounding field, thus makes these adjoining spaces seem continuous and the freight car itself seem overgrown, as if it were an abandoned remnant of an older era of industrial capitalism that had now become available for reappropriation by members of the new generation. In keeping with the NAC’s tendency to stage forms of intimate exchange within or upon abandoned industrial structures, ruinous city spaces, and decaying domestic interiors, the carefree, life-affirming instance of play depicted in this scene does not simply occur on, but seems to be more actively generated by, the overgrown space and dilapidated objects comprising its *mise-en-scene* – spaces and objects that are laden with historical

³⁷⁰ Roger Ebert, “Guns of the Trees Movie Review (1967),” [RogerEbert.com](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/guns-of-the-trees-1967), accessed 7 September 2013, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/guns-of-the-trees-1967>.

significance, evoking the slow death of the old America that the NAC was seeking to overturn and transcend. How should we understand the complex imbrication of vitality, intimacy, overgrowth, and decay conveyed by this sequence?

While the NAC's attraction to sites of ruin and overgrowth may appear to resonate with film noir's profoundly nostalgic engagement with similar spaces, the NAC does not turn to dilapidated, non-synchronous remnants of the "unrefurbished urban past" in an effort to recover some "traditional" realm of experiential plenitude and social coherence persisting like an "urban village" in the interstices of the late-modern city.³⁷¹ Because the old world is depicted by the NAC as inherently lifeless and dehumanizing, this movement embraces decaying relics of that world as indices of its essential mutability, its status as an historical, man-made construct that, despite exuding an aura of immortality, is ultimately subject to change. This quality of mutability is acknowledged in important moments of Arendt's *The Human Condition*, wherein she addresses the merely *relative* permanence of the human artifice, or the fact that its "durability... is not absolute."³⁷² In Arendt's theoretical schema, worldliness is set off against – and perpetually threatened by – a particular form of life that she terms *zōē* or "the life process."³⁷³ Unlike *bios*, which designates a linear series of events in a life that can be reconstructed and recounted as a story (a biography), and which is thus aligned with speech, action, and the establishment of a common world, *zōē* refers to "the ever-recurrent cyclical movement of nature," is affiliated with labor, bodily movements, and practices of consumption, and is thus aligned with the private and considered to be world-

³⁷¹ Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 90, 98.

³⁷² Arendt, *Human Condition* 136.

³⁷³ *Ibid* 96.

destructive.³⁷⁴ Like consumption itself, Arendt explains, “Life is a process that everywhere uses up durability, wears it down, [and] makes it disappear,” and the natural movements of *zōē* “[make their] presence felt in the man-made world through the constant threat of overgrowing or decaying it.”³⁷⁵ When approached in this manner, as a manifestation of the life process, the redemptive potential *Guns of the Trees* invests in its overgrown, abandoned rail yard does not appear as a product of the bygone experiential modalities often perceived to lie dormant within decaying objects of the past, but of the sense of futurity suggested by such objects – their capacity to open windows onto an unknown future by revealing the impermanence of the established human artifice.

Viewing the overgrown rail yard in *Guns of the Trees* as a worldly realm within which *zōē* has “made its presence felt” provides a valuable framework for understanding how homelessness – as non-belonging or detachment from the world – comes to be affiliated with intimacy and vitality in this film, as well as in the broader *oeuvre* of the NAC. For as in the spontaneous jazz session that erupts in *Pull My Daisy*, the intimacy that flourishes in this rail yard scene requires a porous and precarious *mise-en-scène*, a space within which the stability of the human artifice – and by extension, its capacity to house human activities, or to serve as “the non-mortal home for mortal beings” – has been eroded.³⁷⁶ Like the renewed relation to interiority yielded by the uncertainty of a transitional period, a vitalizing, intimate experience is here facilitated by the instability of this non-worldly realm and the feeling of homelessness it induces.

While Arendt would be weary of this effort to valorize the life process at the expense of worldliness, her analysis of *zōē* nevertheless provides insight into this aspect

³⁷⁴ Ibid 96.

³⁷⁵ Ibid 96, 98.

³⁷⁶ Ibid 168.

of Mekas's film. Though Arendt argues that any form of life equated solely with *zōē* is akin to slavery, she does not advocate for "liberation" from the toil of labor and the necessity of the life process. Just as consumption has its own "pleasures," she reminds us, activities and experiences that involve us in the life process – whether when laboring or conducting other "private" activities that emphasize the rhythmic movements of the body – are often accompanied by decidedly intimate affective states, or profoundly subjective feelings that "[black] out all other worldly reality," and which can be felt either as "pain" and "sorrow," or as "bliss," "joy," and "elation."³⁷⁷ For Arendt, these affective states involve more than simple bodily pleasure or displeasure. Their "impact" is so intense, she asserts, that they entail a more basic experience of "life itself," comprising the very "modes in which life itself... makes itself felt."³⁷⁸ In other words, the intense, affective experiences that follow from immersion within the life process give life "its very liveliness and vitality," generating a profound, embodied sensation of *aliveness* that would be lacking from a purely worldly form of existence.³⁷⁹

Though numerous aspects of homelessness can be found operating in the rail yard sequence of *Guns of the Trees*, the intimacy that radiates from Ben and Argus's interactions in this space should be read as an expression of the intensely affective experience yielded by involvement in the life process, by the feeling of accessing an existential modality – a particularly vitalizing form of life – unhinged from worldly reality. Seeking relief from the deadening effects of a sterile society, Mekas, his camera, and his actors gravitate toward an overgrown, marginal urban space caught up in the cyclical movements of *zōē*. With the aid of improvisation, they attempt to channel the

³⁷⁷ Ibid 120.

³⁷⁸ Ibid 120.

³⁷⁹ Ibid 120.

vitality saturating this space for both personal revivification – losing themselves in the opaque, unstructured swirlings of inner experience – and a broader practice of redemption, by registering and transmitting this experience through the filmic image. As an outspoken student of Lumière, Mekas held that cinema’s own mythologized relationship to “life itself,” its capacity to “[transplant] life” from “the street to the screen” in all its “immediacy” and “alive[ness],” could be of great value in conveying the intensity of such moments to a mass audience.³⁸⁰ Indeed, because Mekas counted the absence of vitality among the most alienating features of late-modern mass society and mass culture, the glimpses of redemptive potential that pepper *Guns of the Trees* come almost entirely from brief flashes of spontaneity that somehow manage to show through the cracks of the established human artifice: Ben playfully racing around a lamppost; Argus dancing in an awkward hat; a child smiling on a swing set, etc. Yet as such examples may suggest, his effort to capitalize on cinema’s “natural” vitality required more than a neutral employment of this representational technology. Extending *Pull My Daisy*’s problematic celebration of poverty, the sense of “liveness” conveyed by *Guns of the Trees* relies quite heavily on the “liveliness” traditionally invested in various raced, gendered, or otherwise othered subjects, whether this is located in the perpetual presentness and “animatedness” of persons of color, the “surplus embodiment” of women, or the primitive innocence of children.³⁸¹ It is thus no accident that our encounter with *zōē* in the rail yard scene comes through the enlivening, animated interactions of Ben and Argus who, as persons of color, are consistently valorized in this film as true

³⁸⁰ Mekas, *Movie Journal* 6.

³⁸¹ I borrow the term “animatedness” from Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). On the “surplus embodiment” invested in gendered and raced subjects in American culture, see Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), esp. ch. 3.

“children of nature,” kept at a distance from the worldly environs of the social (despite their white-collar jobs) as a way of facilitating what Mekas described as the new America’s “desire to be close to earth” or to “have a contact with life.”³⁸² In order to be an especially *moving* technology for writing movement, Mekas’s cinematography yokes itself continuously to the fluid excess and indeterminacy of those positioned outside the fixed coordinates of the social.

Along with such political issues, Mekas’s broader investment in vitality points to a more basic tension structuring the homeless movies of the NAC, one whose implications harbor as much relevance for public and private sphere theory as they do for critical understandings of the NAC. As the preceding analysis of *Guns of the Trees* and *Pull My Daisy* indicates, the NAC’s interest in the invigorating, non-worldly experience yielded by *zōē* does not manifest itself solely in the narrative content of such films. When we recall Arendt’s affiliation of worldliness with both material things and cultural conventions, it becomes clear that the NAC’s investment in accessing a vitalizing realm of experience situated outside or against the established world also informs these artists’ formal practices (their rejection of all established cinematic and artistic standards, codes, and conventions for a “spontaneous” cinema); their organizational practices (for instance, Mekas’s plea to avoid institutional affiliation, or to keep avant-garde institutions “disorganizedly organized”); and the broader “way of life” that many of them adopted and pursued (the attempt to inhabit homelessness, or to elaborate a life of perpetual

³⁸² J. Hoberman, “The Forest and *The Trees*” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) 113; Mekas, “Cinema of the New Generation” 17, 13.

vagabondage).³⁸³ This effort to resist aesthetic conventions, institutionalization, and domestic or professional stability was certainly not limited to the NAC but formed a more general horizon of sub- and counter-cultural activities in the U.S. during the late '50s and '60s, as can be seen especially well in New York-based avant-garde art from this period, from Fluxus to the Living Theater, and from performance art and happenings to action painting and pop art. However, to the extent that the NAC's commitment to spontaneity and immediacy entailed more than a mere contestation of then-dominant configurations of worldly reality and motivated a more radical rebellion against stability, permanence, and reification *tout court* – or against the very permanence of the human artifice – the NAC's parallel effort to integrate this rebellion into a project of alternative world building would seem to have been doomed from the outset. Which is to say, if the NAC's rebellion against aesthetic and cultural stability can be equated with a valorization of *zōē* at the expense of worldliness, and if the intimacy and vitality of the former is truly worldless, then this movement's interest in rebuilding the world in a more intimate, vitalizing form would seem to be a contradiction in terms.

In a provocative moment of *The Human Condition*, Arendt makes this point herself, reasserting the incompatibility of *zōē* and the human artifice in a section concerning “The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art” that many representatives of the '60s avant-garde would have found highly conservative. Contrasting human capacities such as thought, exchange, and usage with “mere attributes of the human animal like feelings, wants, and needs,” Arendt states that any attempt to create a world with such attributes as its basis could only result in a “non-world,” or a

³⁸³ Quoted in Arthur, “Routines of Emancipation: Jonas Mekas and Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties” in *A Line of Sight*, op. cit., 7.

profoundly unstable and intangible environment produced through “emanation rather than creation.”³⁸⁴ Because these attributes are essentially private, subjective, and affiliated with the life process, they are said to require the transformative – or transfigurative – work of human capacities to fashion them into a shape fit for public appearance. This is the creative work of reification and artistic fabrication, processes through which the fluid affects or “passionate intensit[ies]” of inner experience are “release[d]... from [their] imprisonment within the self” and made to assume a common, objective material form.³⁸⁵ And though Arendt acknowledges that reification always comes at “the price [of] life itself,” she nevertheless insists that “the human artifice could never be a reliable home for men” without this element of “deadness” or stability.³⁸⁶

What happens, then, when a whole culture takes shape around a project of intimate world building? How do the stakes or terms of artistic practice shift when an assemblage of artists refuse to succumb to the “deadness... present in all art” and begin elaborating a more vital mode of production committed to the retention of what Arendt terms the “living spirit”?³⁸⁷ And what consequences result from the implicit disturbance of public and private divisions enacted by such a mode of cultural production, where matters traditionally deemed “irrelevant” to the public are made the basis of relational practices? In a manner that resonates with divergent social, political, and cultural tendencies of the American ‘60s, the NAC’s investment in personal cinema – or a mode of film practice oriented toward the public exhibition of private experiences in a manner that would not relinquish their “passionate intensity” – emerged from a more broadly

³⁸⁴ Arendt, Human Condition 168.

³⁸⁵ Ibid 168.

³⁸⁶ Ibid 169, 167.

³⁸⁷ Ibid 169.

held belief that the suppression of private concerns from the public sphere was not contributing to the establishment of commonality and freedom, but to the maintenance of an oppressive and repressive late-modern American social realm. Indeed, as we have seen, this regulation of intimate expression was central to the feelings of non-belonging suffered by members of this film culture, and the extension of public impersonality and conformism into the previously private space of the home also motivated their belief that then-dominant configurations of domestic life were ultimately uninhabitable. Yet how might the NAC's effort to merge private experience with public expression and integrate intimacy into a project of world building have contributed to the very condition of homelessness these artists were working to combat? How does one maintain a community of belonging if one is opposed to its persistence in a durable form, or seek to establish residence within an environment built from the transient emanations of inner experience?

There is no better way to explore these questions than through a consideration of the life and films of Ron Rice, the NAC's resident "wildman." Just as the story of Rice's too-brief adult life should be recounted as a perpetual struggle to negotiate the anxious and liberating dimensions of postwar homelessness, his tragically short filmography encapsulates the tensions and contradictions subtending the NAC's redemptive project, standing as a testament to the profound difficulties entailed in any effort to reconstitute the world in a more vital, intimate form.

CHAPTER THREE

RON RICE, VAGABOND

I. A Wandering Sickness

The beginning of the 1960s marked a significant turning point in the life of Ron Rice. Though Rice initially began his artistic life as a painter, in 1959 he became interested in making a transition into filmmaking, a medium he began experimenting with during the summer of 1958 but which he only adopted as an artistic practice after reading Jonas Mekas's film criticism and discussing film with Mekas in the spring of 1959. This artistic shift occurred contemporaneous with a more dramatic life change that Rice began planning circa November 1959, when he decided to leave his home in New York City where he was born in 1935, and "set out in quest of adventure." Camping equipment was purchased and inspected, weather reports were analyzed, and the liberating hardship of a life of travel was envisioned: "Bring on those mountains of black sea, plains of freezing snow, green entanglements of seething heat," he writes in a diary entry from December 10th, 1959: "Drown me, freeze me, burn me, but you can't chain me. Or can you? Am I not now chained to the city, the subway, the company, the Country, the World?" Thus seeking to break the chains binding him to "the World" and immerse himself in the unstructured intensity of what he termed "Nature," Rice departed from the East Coast in the beginning of 1960.

In the five year span that separated this worldly departure from the one that occurred in an Acapulco hospital at the end of 1964, Rice's life was defined by a near-

constant state of movement, whether this took shape through his incessant, physical journeying or through his active pursuit of the virtual mobility provided by aesthetic experience and the drug state. For Rice, whose investment in narcotics has been well documented, art and drugs were fundamentally equivalent, valued for their capacity to transport him to what he termed “impossible places,” or locations that he “[could not] reach on the subway.”³⁸⁸ But his actual movements during this period index an equivalent commitment to travel as a way of life.

Between the beginning of 1960 and the end of 1964, Rice crossed the North American continent at least seven times, traveling variously by car, train, or plane, and pausing to take up temporary forms of residence in various Bohemian enclaves in California, New York, and Mexico, where he generally depended on friends and girlfriends for money, housing, and film supplies. During this five year stretch, Rice completed three films: *The Flower Thief* (1960), which he shot amidst the death knell of the Beat scene in San Francisco’s North Beach with Taylor Mead and a host of other local artists and beatniks; *Senseless* (1962), which combined scenes shot in San Francisco and Venice, CA, with improvisational sequences and travelogue footage from a road trip through Mexico; and *Chumlum* (1964), a psychedelic montage of multiple exposures that Rice shot in New York with members of the burgeoning underground film scene, including Jack Smith, Beverly Grant, and Francis Francine. He also produced a rough cut of the epic feature he shot in New York between 1963-64, *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*. Before completing this project, however, Rice died suddenly of bronchial

³⁸⁸ Ron Rice, “Diaries, Notebooks, Scripts, Letters, Documents,” *Film Culture* 39 (Winter, 1965): 119. See also Rice, “Diaries” 118, 122; Jack Sargeant, *The Naked Lens: An Illustrated History of Beat Cinema* (London: Creation Books, 1997) 84.

pneumonia on December 22nd, 1964, while living with his wife Amy on the outskirts of Acapulco. He was twenty-nine years old.³⁸⁹

Though patchy and brief, this overview of Rice's activities between 1960 and the end of 1964 suffices to demonstrate that his initial departure from New York did not mark the beginning of a mere road trip. This departure inaugurated a more definitive turn away from the normative way of life prescribed by then-dominant American culture through the assumption of a life of vagabondage: an improvisatory, itinerant mode of living rooted in the abandonment of domestic stability, which entailed a corresponding drift away from the central spaces and values of late-modern American society. We know from the journal entries Rice composed between 1962 and 1964 that he considered cinema an integral component of the mobile, rootless manner of living he developed during this period. He believed film to be capable of "captur[ing] forever the very spirit of motion," and viewed the motion picture camera as "a black suitcase full of magic," a sort of requisite carry-on for the nomadic "witch doctor" he was seeking to become.³⁹⁰ But how should we understand Rice's sudden adoption of this homeless lifestyle? And what should we make of the way in which this life change coincided with his decision to take up filmmaking?

Rice's turn to a rootless, bohemian lifestyle could certainly be read as a simple reiteration of the romanticized vision of homelessness put forward by *Pull My Daisy*. The influence *Pull My Daisy* had on Rice and Mead during the production of *The Flower Thief* is well known, and Rice's personal writings and films from this period reveal his

³⁸⁹ While there has been some disagreement about Rice's age at the time of his death, Rice's 1962 application for a Guggenheim Fellowship lists his date of birth as November 7th, 1935. See Rice, application to John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 14 October 1962, Reginald Gay Collection of Taylor Mead and Related Materials, New York Public Library, New York.

³⁹⁰ Rice, "Diaries" 95, 102.

strong affinity with Beat culture, and the significant relationships he established with poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and Bob Kaufman.³⁹¹ Rice was very much part of the “Beat da-da-da,” and his investments in travel and marginality could easily be written off as evincing a naïve equation of homelessness with unconstrained freedom.³⁹²

This interpretation is reinforced by the collection of anecdotes, publicity materials, and critical writings that together comprise avant-garde film legend, in which Rice has been represented with a striking level of consistency as an untamed “wild man” who exemplifies the ideal of unconstrained spontaneity and dynamism championed by the Beats. Over and over, we find descriptions of Rice as a figure of “primitive forcefulness”; a “solid mustachioed strong man who might have rode with Poncho Villa”; a “professional rebel”; a “psychopath”; or a drug-fueled, “outcast visionary” whose anarchic, “push the button” approach to filmmaking was merely an extension of the adrenalized lifestyle that eventually led to his death.³⁹³ In such recollections, Rice appears as a veritable embodiment of *zōē*, a modern savage driven by an insatiable lust for “life itself.” His decision to leave “the World” and dive head first into the sublime intensity of “Nature” would thus seem to provide a perfect case study for examining then-pervasive countercultural ambitions to abandon worldly durability for the vitalizing rhythms of the

³⁹¹ Taylor Mead and Barry Clark (a filmmaker who lent Rice his Bolex for use on *The Flower Thief*) have both noted the influence that *Pull My Daisy* had on Rice. For Mead’s comments, see Sargeant 81; for Clark’s, see “Ron Rice Biography,” *Film and Video Art: A Collection of Information*, ed. Hugh McCarney, March 2006, Western Connecticut State University, 30 July 2014 <http://people.wcsu.edu/mccarneyh/fva/t/RRice_bio.html>. Mead also references *Pull My Daisy* in a letter sent to Rice after an early screening of *The Flower Thief* in San Francisco. See Mead, letter to Ron Rice, 16 June 1960, Reginald Gay Collection.

³⁹² Parker Tyler, “For *Shadows*, Against *Pull My Daisy*” in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002) 109.

³⁹³ Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton, 1967) 175; P. Adams Sitney, “Ron Rice: SENSELESS; CHUMLUM,” program notes from The Avantgarde Film Tuesday Series at the Jewish Museum, 10 December 1968, Paper Materials Collection, Anthology Film Archives, New York; Eugene Archer, quoted in Mary Batten, “Ron Rice & His Work,” *Film Comment* 1.3 (1962): 30; Clark, quoted in McCarney, “Ron Rice Biography”; Sargeant ch. 3, 82.

life process, just as his too-brief adult life could be read as a tragic testament to the futility of such projects.

There is a level of truth to such perceptions. After all, this is an artist who advertised his own work as “mad” and “absurd,” was temporarily committed to an insane asylum, advocated publicly for bank robbery, criticized “self-conscious spontaneity” in the arts, and advanced a neo-dadaist-cum-Buddhist mode of artistic practice termed “Dazendada.”³⁹⁴ But despite his self-proclaimed senselessness, avant-garde film history’s construction of Rice as the apogee of beatific immediacy, a mad artist who lived spontaneity and died because of it, has elided important aspects of his life and work. For instance, as I demonstrate in more detail below, Rice’s belief in the importance of film form has been obscured by critical analyses that emphasize the chaotic and spontaneous dimensions of his work. Perhaps more important for our purposes, the discourse surrounding Rice’s “madness” or “wildness” undercuts Rice’s own statements about the irrational, diseased, and even barbarous condition of late-modern American society, or what he referred to derogatorily as “Civilization.”³⁹⁵ Rice’s posthumously published journals clarify that he did not only believe that daily life in the U.S. was constraining and repressive. He also believed that it was sickening, which is to say, generative of deleterious effects on the mental, physical, and spiritual life of the human organism.

In Rice’s mind, the maladies of late-modern America were manifold. His journals, letters, and artistic statements from this period index innumerable socio-cultural ills – some real, some hallucinated – that he blamed for the growing “insanity” of American society. Among the most significant of these was the progressive mechanization of daily

³⁹⁴ Rice, “Diaries” 121, 117, 118, 119. On Rice’s temporary internment in Bellevue, see Mekas, Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971 (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 116-118.

³⁹⁵ See, for instance, Rice, “Diaries” 90, 105, 113.

experience by late-modern systems of capital and mass communication, which Rice held responsible for an inexorable “extension of industry” into all previously autonomous realms of experience. Echoing far more general concerns from this era about one-dimensionality, Rice considered this extension responsible for eradicating both the artistic realm (through commercialization) and individual consciousness (through reification), as well as for altering the very composition of time, which he believed had been accelerated and intensified to such a degree by systems of mass communication that no “Time gaps” remained in daily experience for critical reflection or repose. While Rice worried over the general conditions of alienation resulting from this process, he was especially concerned with its debilitating effects on artistic work, which he believed required access to a peaceful, intimate realm conducive to creative expression.

Rice’s interest in this sort of intimate domain comes through in numerous moments of his personal journals. This interest is best expressed, however, in a letter Rice wrote to Robert Frank on May 29th, 1964, shortly after Rice began living with his wife Amy near Acapulco. Invoking the imagery of Jean Cocteau’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), this letter contrasts the wild Mexican shoreline with the inhuman beastliness of New York City. In Mexico, Rice explains, “the backgrounds contain the most wild assortment of giant cactus, twisted trees, vultures... [and] disappearing stairways,” and one can envision “beauty herself... drifting along... in color and transparent gown, green vapor rising from her hair.”³⁹⁶ New York conjures a different sort of image, as we see in this passage, which I have reproduced in the manner that it appears in Rice’s letter:

the figure of the beast is something else. he drains the spirit,leaves you
felling dull,full of anxieties and worries which spread a vile infection thru

³⁹⁶ Rice, letter to Robert Frank, 29 May 1964, Paper Materials Collection, Anthology Film Archives, New York, printed as “Letter from Ron Rice to Robert Frank,” *Film Culture* 70-71 (1982).

the body. in new york the beast is reality itself* “modern suffering” made possible with all the great machines I guess you can see at the worlds fair, here in mexico where there are not so many machines, life is more fun. the creative faculty developes, the mind and body gets a complete rest. (this is very important for artists) ideas for movies come and go, the spring of creation wound tight freewhells itself, gaing speed, spinning out down the lone some hig hway.³⁹⁷

As the beastly incarnation of “modern suffering,” New York City is charged here with spreading a malignant “infection” through the body that also impacts one’s mental and spiritual well-being. By contrast, the less-modernized (and explicitly feminized) environs of Acapulco offer a restorative environment for reversing the exhausting effects of life in the city and putting the artist back in touch with the inner, “creative [faculty].” New York is rendered as a depthless, infertile, and artificial terrain, whereas Acapulco is imagined as a deep space where intimacy and vitality thrive – a “rugged” environment where “the huge waves of the elevator sea threaten to wash you off if you go to[o] low,” and the uncontainable “spring of creation” flows freely.³⁹⁸

Though Rice composed this letter four-and-a-half years after he first departed from his home in New York City, his description of the relief he found in Acapulco provides an important lens through which to reframe his initial turn to a life of vagabondage. Such a reframing, I propose, allows us to envision Rice’s departure from New York at the beginning of 1960 as an action motivated not merely by the lure of the open road, but also by an *urgently felt need for shelter* from the inhospitable life-world of late-modern American society. In his letter to Frank, Rice’s decision to move to Mexico in the middle of 1964 is not framed as a quest for adventure, but as an effort to locate or regain something like home: a detached space of spiritual repose where the vitalizing

³⁹⁷ Rice, letter to Robert Frank.

³⁹⁸ Rice, letter to Robert Frank.

impulses of inner experience could be cultivated and articulated. If we project this longing for an alternative home-space backwards, Rice's decision to leave behind the stability of his home in New York for a life of itinerancy and marginality comes into view as an expression of the NAC's characteristic attempt to position a homeless lifestyle as the remedy to postwar homelessness.

Some might argue that it is problematic to collapse the distance separating these two moments. However, journal entries that Rice composed at the end of 1959 contain sentiments about New York that are quite similar to those which he expressed in his letter to Frank. In his aforementioned entry from December 10th, 1959, for instance, Rice characterizes New York as a "Big Monster" before referring to it more simply as "the city which I hate," and also describes New York as an exhausting, constrictive, and anxiety-inducing environment, one that leaves him "tired and edgy," with his "desire trampled" and all escape routes "block[ed]."³⁹⁹ Before he left home in 1960, then, Rice was already suffering from a severe case of urban malaise, one that mirrors the position of Gregory in Jonas Mekas's *Guns of the Trees* (1960) and so many of classical *noir*'s doomed protagonists. But rather than worrying about discovering a true "way out," Rice simply left town – a gesture that must have confounded Mekas.

³⁹⁹ Rice, "Diaries" 89. Rice's hatred of New York appears to have been rather consistent during the time he spent there between 1960-64. For instance, personal writings of his composed between 1962-63 include references to New York that are comparable in many respects to that noted here. In an unpublished journal entry that appears to have been composed in the summer of 1962, following Rice's receipt of the Most Promising Filmmaker award at the Charles Theatre's 1962 American Filmmakers' Festival in July 1962, Rice colors New York as an "exhaust[ing]" realm of "destruction," "speed," and "murder," and details his exasperation with the city's independent film scene (Rice, untitled journal entry, n.d., Reginald Gay Collection.) And in a letter Rice originally intended to send to the *Village Voice* in the winter of 1962-63, he describes New York as a "great void" (Rice, "Diaries" 119). See also: Mekas's remarks on Rice's decision to leave New York for Acapulco in *Movie Journal* 161-162; and Rice's diatribe against "this motherfucker of cities" in letter to unknown recipient, 20 September 1962, Reginald Gay Collection.

Rice's hatred of New York demonstrates that the images of untamed "Nature" that guided his initial departure from the city in 1960 should not be read as fantasies of a "mad" or "wild" man. They should instead be viewed as testaments to Rice's difficulty in envisioning a realm of life existing outside the mechanizing rhythms of urban-industrial society: an *elsewhere* that, in stark contrast to the impersonal confines of the late-modern American city, would be conducive to the expression of intimacy. It is only by approaching Rice's investment in "Nature" in this manner that we can understand how he was able to feel so at home amidst the "wild" landscape he came to inhabit in Acapulco, where he was surrounded by gnarly vegetation, massive waves threatening instant death, and cliff-side stairways that dropped without warning "to the jagged rocks below," vultures circling above. To be sure, this was a strangely precarious sort of residence. But Rice deemed the wildness of the Acapulco seaside capable of reviving an equally untamable interiority, that is, of stimulating a correspondence between inner and outer domains that could yield a crucial sense of refuge from one-dimensionality.

Rice's belief that such an intimate, alternative residence could only be accessed by assuming a self-imposed exile in Mexico speaks to the impressive hegemony established in the postwar U.S. by middle-class culture: its success in suppressing, containing, or expelling alternative modes of living, and continuously rendering its particular conventions and rules of appearance as constitutive of American culture, *tout court*. When we approach Rice's vagabondage in this fashion, as a lifestyle he developed in an effort to locate an alternative home-space at a moment when American culture had become immensely inhospitable to alternatives, an intriguing tension becomes apparent at the heart of his project. From this perspective, Rice's turn to a life of rootlessness and

mobility appears as a paradoxical effort to achieve a degree of personal and cultural stability, or to seek out a differently configured life-world that could serve as a reliable venue for the intimate experiences that were being denied by then-dominant American culture. Any analysis of Rice's life and films must account for this basic paradox.

II. Impossible Places

That Rice eventually attempted to regain a sense of home in Mexico is somewhat inevitable, given that country's status in the Beat imaginary as something like the moral region *par excellence*.⁴⁰⁰ Yet his films consistently seek out, and unfold within, similarly unsettled *mise-en-scènes* whose volatile environs parallel his description of life on the Acapulco seaside in many respects. When viewed together, these environs provide significant insight into Rice's investment in vagabondage and cinema as potential remedies for homelessness. As I argue in this chapter, the peripheral locales featured in his work, and the errant subcultural formations housed by these locales, function paradoxically as the gravitational center of Rice's films. These detached locales connect the divergent productions comprising his "broken-off" body of work, each of which can otherwise appear to constitute a "new departure" from the last, as Jonas Mekas observed shortly after Rice's death.⁴⁰¹ Produced as they were in distant cities across the U.S. and Mexico with meager resources that encouraged experimentation and innovation, Rice's films are disparate both geographically and stylistically. But they all revolve around distinctly transient spaces and social forms, whose centrality to Rice's work must be

⁴⁰⁰ See, for instance, Manuel Luis Martinez, "'With Imperious Eye': Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg on the Road in South America," *Aztlán* 23.1 (Spring 1998).

⁴⁰¹ Mekas, *Movie Journal* 171.

understood within the context of the postwar anxieties about homelessness elaborated in the previous chapter.

In what follows, I position Rice's creative practice, and particularly his efforts to inhabit, document, and envision a series of unruly, intimate social realms, amidst what I describe as the broader world-building project conducted by the NAC. Following Michael Warner's analysis of public discourse as a form of "poetic world making," I view this project as an effort to harness the poetic capacity inhering in cinema's specifically public mode of address toward the characterization and realization of an alternative world.⁴⁰² By "alternative world," I mean a configuration of material objects (such as films and cultural institutions) and cultural conventions developed in an effort to organize and stabilize a way of living defined by its difference from that housed by the dominant world.⁴⁰³ The NAC's filmic intervention constitutes such a world-building project, I propose, because the new forms of cinema it strove to produce and perpetuate, like the cultural institutions it founded and maintained, were not created merely for artistic purposes, but to shelter modes of experience and relationality unrecognized by the dominant institutions and conventions of late-modern American culture. As I argue, however, this world-building project was of an especially peculiar variety. The world envisioned by the NAC, and the modes of creative practice that artists such as Rice developed to realize that world, were valued for their conduciveness to intimacy. Yet intimacy was imagined by the NAC as a fundamentally unstable relational mode, one whose primary attribute lay in its capacity to exceed institutionalization and disrupt established conventions, thus rendering it difficult to instantiate as a world.

⁴⁰² Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2005) 114.

⁴⁰³ I draw this notion of worldliness from Hannah Arendt. See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998) esp. 93-96.

The tension subtending the NAC's poetic ambitions manifests itself most dramatically in the life and films of Ron Rice. As I show in this chapter, though Rice continuously strove to locate and generate alternative sites of intimate exchange as remedies to postwar homelessness, he also celebrated intimacy as a *wild* thing resistant to domestication. To demonstrate this, I analyze the multiple scenes of intimate encounter and exchange that structure Rice's films and writings, focusing primarily on his representation of the North Beach Beat hangout, the Co-Existence Bagel Shop, in his first feature *The Flower Thief*, and on the ways in which his simultaneous desire for and suspicion of worldliness impacted the conception of cinema he developed while working on this film. As I argue, intimacy operates in *The Flower Thief* at a variety of levels, facilitating transient modes of private and public experience that differ considerably from those promoted by then-dominant American culture. This film stands as a testament to intimacy's poetic potential, revealing its ability to generate spaces conducive to alternative forms of living in which new modalities of inwardness and belonging can emerge. At the same time, *The Flower Thief* also reveals the limitations of intimacy as a world-building medium. The intimate spaces it depicts do not solidify and persist because they are grounded on ephemeral relational practices valued for their instability, rendering them perpetually vulnerable to outside forces and subject to constant change from within. *The Flower Thief* therefore reveals the need to problematize Rice's belief that intimacy could remedy the conditions of shelterlessness and alienation suffered under late modernity.

As an extension of my reading of *The Flower Thief*, I end this chapter with a brief coda, which considers how Rice's personal and artistic trajectories raise larger questions

about the viability of the NAC's world-building project, and the radical claims that are often wedded to the 1960s American avant-garde's efforts to integrate life and art. To do so, I consider how Rice's films and personal writings from the period after *The Flower Thief*'s production reveal how his refusal to relinquish intimacy and vitality as the governing principles of his life and work led him to progressively extreme lengths in his pursuit of an alternative home-space.

We can better understand intimacy's complex status in Rice's oeuvre by considering how intimacy functions in the peripheral locations and subcultural formations featured in his films. Though these spaces and formations vary considerably, each of them reveal Rice's association of intimacy with marginality and mobility. They also demonstrate his investment in the redemptive potential of alternative modes of intimate experience, and his belief in cinema's facility for cultivating and transmitting such experiences.

In *The Flower Thief*, for instance, a bohemian bar, an abandoned powerhouse, and a peripheral, bayside fairground in San Francisco's North Beach become staging grounds for anarchical forms of creative expression and unsanctioned modes of interpersonal relation enacted by a wild assortment of beatniks. The film's transient protagonist, played by Taylor Mead, drifts through these locales like a bit of urban flotsam, observing and participating in the intimate practices that animate them, whereby fluid issuances from inner experience circulate and resonate with other wastrels of the modern world. In *Senseless*, the dread pervading San Francisco's official life-world, a space weighted down by consumer culture and the threat of nuclear disaster, is alleviated by escaping southward to Venice and Baja California. These detached, slower regions serve as the

backdrops against which Rice and a group of friends struggle to liberate themselves from the apocalyptic atmosphere of the cold war via druggy meanderings, profane rituals, and impromptu forms of play. In *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, the exotic yet shabby interiors of the titular monarch's New York City digs become the site of a delirious, queer encounter between Mead, Winifred Bryant, and Jack Smith, who work to parry urban loneliness through an extended round of licentious frolicking. In *Chumlum*, a cavernous loft floating somewhere above or behind the rigid enclosures of lower Manhattan provides a disorienting, ethereal venue for a host of costumed creatures to embark on a seemingly endless, amorous idle. Even *The Mexican Footage*, a posthumously compiled collection of camera rolls Rice shot in Mexico, begins with a tangle of hairy limbs, swaying bodies, and vaguely oriental adornments melding with rural landscapes, and then shifts into diaristic footage of Rice and friends riding trains through the countryside or playing conga drums amidst ancient ruins.

The haphazard social forms that consistently flash up within these locations enfold a rather motley collection of cinematic intimacies, condensing Rice's divergent attempts to utilize film as a medium for establishing new modes of intimate experience and relation. On the one hand, such depictions index the search for an alternative home-space that occupied Rice throughout his artistic career, and which spurred their production in the first place. The small, bayside neighborhood in northern San Francisco famous for harboring that city's "Poetry Renaissance" in the 1950s; the seaside slum at the edge of Los Angeles, where a "barbaric" subculture emerged into notoriety at the end of that decade; the cities and rural villages scattered throughout the Beats' preferred "sacred colony" to the south, variously celebrated in the writings of William Burroughs,

Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac; and the various “unclean corners” that sheltered an emergent, underground film community in 1960s New York – Rice actively sought out these bohemian enclaves as part of his everyday life practice, endeavoring to participate in the unruly subcultures they were reported to house, and to avail himself of their redemptive environs.⁴⁰⁴ At one level, his films document different stages of that pursuit, providing glimpses into the marginal scenes Rice came temporarily to move through and inhabit.

Yet cinema also played a more active role in fostering these scenes. At the level of production, for instance, Rice’s camera often provided the occasion for the perverse performances we witness in his films, just as his decidedly amateur mode of production engendered highly affective bonds – what Rice once referred to as feelings of “intima[cy]” and “close[ness]” – between the persons involved in each project.⁴⁰⁵ Rice’s films also consistently rework the irrational activities they depict at the level of representation, transfiguring profilmic occurrences through diverse and inventive formal strategies that further evacuate such occurrences of reason, heightening their disharmony with everyday reality by abstracting them into an “absurd,” aesthetic dimension.⁴⁰⁶ As much as Rice’s works bear witness to his seemingly perpetual search for an ideal home-space, they also put forward imaginative projections of that ideal, utilizing what he described as the “MAGIC” of cinema to conjure images of alternative experiential realms

⁴⁰⁴ Jack Kerouac, quoted in Sargeant 69; Lawrence Lipton, The Holy Barbarians (New York: Julian Messner, 1959); Martinez 42; Mekas, Movie Journal 75. On the North Beach Beat culture, see also: Francis J. Rigney and L. Douglas Smith, The Real Bohemia: A Sociological and Psychological Study of the ‘Beats’ (New York: Basic, 1961). On Venice’s Beat scene, see also: John Arthur Maynard, Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

⁴⁰⁵ Batten 34.

⁴⁰⁶ On the status of the absurd in Rice’s films, see: Rice, “Foundation for the Invention and Creation of Absurd Movies,” Film Culture 24 (1962): 19, republished in Film Culture 39 (Winter 1965): 117; and Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema,” Film Culture Reader 101-102.

saturated by the revitalizing currents of intimacy.⁴⁰⁷ For Rice, this magic was not merely illusory. Like other affiliates of the NAC, he believed the senseless imagery contained in his films could have profound effects on the audiences who engaged them, whether by “reach[ing] men through the heart, and caus[ing] them to think,” or by provoking more ecstatic states of “sublimity” and “Euphoria” that he conceived in opposition to the mere entertainment provided by superficial forms of mass communication.⁴⁰⁸ As his previously cited statement on art’s ability to “transport” the viewer to “impossible places” suggests, Rice believed that cinema could induce a liberating feeling of dislocation in the viewer, a sense of gaining access to an other-worldly domain set off from the dehumanizing environs of late modernity. His films were not conceived as mere abstractions, but as material conveyances to the alternative realms they served simultaneously to index and envision.⁴⁰⁹

Along with demonstrating his participation in the redemptive project of the NAC, Rice’s efforts to foster intimate relations through an amateur film practice also reveal his commitment to this movement’s related ambition to mobilize cinema toward the creation of a more vitalizing and humanizing world. This poetic ambition is formulated most clearly in Mekas’s “Where Are We—the Underground?,” in which Mekas characterizes the new generation as a movement being “pulled by a desire for something joyful deep within us, deep in the stars” that its members were working to “bring... down to earth so that it will change our cities, our faces, our movements, our voices, our souls.”⁴¹⁰ But the

⁴⁰⁷ Rice, “Diaries” 95.

⁴⁰⁸ Rice, notes for federal grant; Rice, note on intention of films, n.d., Reginald Gay Collection.

⁴⁰⁹ Rice reiterates this belief in a note composed ca. 1962-63, in which he states: “I have been trying to discover the ‘secret’, where by [sic] my visual images contain the plazma [sic] of the Euphoria one feels when carried away to regions of fantasy as when listening to music” (note on intention of films.)

⁴¹⁰ Mekas, “Where Are We—the Underground?” in *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1967) 21.

NAC's poetic drive is also evidenced in the intimate locales and congregations that organize Rice's films, revealing his desire to elaborate a space in time where artists could reliably cultivate inner experience, and where the expression of these experiences could attain recognition by others. Despite Rice's stated interest in unchaining himself from "the World," one finds a persistent striving for worldliness in his films, writings, and everyday life practices – a longing to discover or construct a relatively stable cultural realm within which an experience of home could be secured.

While the intimate scenes that we encounter in Rice's films do demonstrate his relative success in establishing such a realm, standing as they do as relics of the dispersed, subterranean communities he helped to cultivate in the early '60s, the very plurality of these scenes speaks to the recurrent problems Rice confronted in his efforts to locate or construct an alternative world: whether in San Francisco, Venice, Baja, or New York, the subcultural communities to which Rice journeyed seemed to be perpetually on the brink of dissolution. The precarity of these communities (at least those in the U.S.) was no doubt ensured by the pressures imposed on them by containment culture. The persecution of artistic communities by various municipal entities in San Francisco and Los Angeles throughout the late '50s and early '60s is a matter of public record, and the impressive resources mobilized by the city of New York and the federal government to censor and harass avant-garde filmmakers throughout the 1960s has been the subject of extensive critical commentary.⁴¹¹ However, even as Rice's films and writings frequently gesture to such external pressures, they also illuminate an internal tension structuring the

⁴¹¹ On San Francisco and Los Angeles, see especially: Rigney and Smith ch. 10; Maynard chs. 5 and 8. On censorship and harassment in New York, see for instance: Mekas, *Movie Journal* 126-130, 132-138, 161-163, 234-235, 329-332; Juan A. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens & Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*, ch. 5; and Brian L. Frye, "The Dialectic of Obscenity," *Hamline Law Review* 35.1 (Winter 2012).

NAC's efforts at alternative world building that is not typically acknowledged by apologists of this movement. Though Rice's decision to seek out these communities stemmed from his desire for a stable realm or locale that could reliably facilitate the intimate experiences he believed were essential to creative practice, the version of intimacy he valued was a fundamentally transient and irrational one that thwarted all attempts at organization and prediction. His pursuit of an alternative home-space was thus grounded on a contradiction: Rice wanted to locate or construct a world capable of housing an inherently vagrant experiential form. Though this project was actively and continually obstructed by an oppressively normative containment culture, Rice's contradictory desires for stability and unpredictability reveal that it was also hindered by his personal investment in the wildness of intimacy.

When we approach Rice's engagement with film and his turn to a life of homelessness as decisions that were driven by competing investments in immediacy and shelter, Rice's life and work can be said to exemplify what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have identified as the complications entailed by projects of intimate world building. As Berlant and Warner explain in their influential essay "Sex in Public," efforts to organize social worlds around alternative forms of intimacy conflict with normative perceptions of intimate life as a purely private affair. As a result, such efforts tend to be relegated to "mobile sites" of subcultural practice, or transient and often illicit domains where intimacies that have been deemed "criminal" or "nonstandard" by dominant culture can be cultivated, though in necessarily fleeting and ephemeral ways.⁴¹² While these erratic spaces provide members of unrecognized subcultures with crucial "context[s] for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of

⁴¹² Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," Critical Inquiry 24.2 (Winter 1998): 561, 558.

belonging and transformation,” Berlant and Warner emphasize that the experiences of selfhood and collectivity afforded by such contexts are also limited in important ways, noting that the very “mobility [that] makes [these sites] possible... also renders them hard to recognize as world making because they are so fragile and ephemeral.”⁴¹³

Reflecting either side of this problem, Rice’s films and writings valorize intimacy’s capacity to generate such “mobile sites” of private and public experience, celebrating the fleeting modes of inwardness and belonging that emerge through improvised practices of intimate exchange. But they also consistently figure the transience of such experiences as a source of anxiety. Oscillating continuously between an infectious optimism for intimacy’s vitalizing potential and a disappointment over that potential’s failure to endure, his work illustrates with particular clarity what Berlant has identified in another context as intimacy’s simultaneously poetic and destabilizing character. While intimacy harbors a distinct capacity to “[build] worlds,” Berlant asserts, or to “[create] spaces and [usurp] places meant for other kinds of relation,” this capacity is offset by its stubborn tendency to neutralize its own world-building force, as the latent unpredictability of intimate relations always threatens to “[destabilize] the very things that institutions of intimacy are created to stabilize...”⁴¹⁴

As is demonstrated by the multiple modalities of intimacy animated by Rice’s depictions of subcultural formations discussed above, Rice seeks in his films to usurp the impersonal spaces of cinematic production, representation, and exhibition as forums of intimate relation. In doing so, he enlists intimacy’s poetic capacity in the creation of alternative worlds conducive to new forms of habitation. Yet his ultimate suspicion of

⁴¹³ Berlant and Warner 561, 558.

⁴¹⁴ Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue” in *Intimacy*, ed. Berlant (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2000) 2, 6.

organization and stability ensure the perpetual postponement of that world's arrival. If Rice's intimate cinema can be characterized, following Berlant, as an "aesthetic of attachment," or an effort to forge the affective bonds that undergird intimate worlds, his films must also be viewed as testaments to the precarity of all forms of attachment mediated by intimacy, a relational form whose "potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity..."⁴¹⁵

We will be better equipped to examine the dialectic between attachment and dispersal that structures Rice's films if we analyze the relationship between intimacy and worldliness more closely. Hannah Arendt's affiliation of intimacy with the world-destructive movements of *zōē* or "the life process" in a series of writings published at the end of the '50s and the beginning of the '60s provides the most useful interpretive framework through which to make sense of Rice's troubles with intimate world building. Her analysis in these writings of a far-reaching "crisis" precipitated by the "decay of culture in mass society" is useful because it conflicts so dramatically with discourse surrounding the NAC.⁴¹⁶ In keeping with Arendt's understanding of decay as merely one stage of a broader cycle of life, the loss of worldliness Arendt describes ultimately turns on an extensive *vitalization* of the artistic sphere that resonates strongly with the ambitions of the NAC. But for Arendt, the becoming-vital of art is not associated with the avant-garde formations that emerged contemporaneous with her writing, but with the rise of an American mass-cultural regime oriented toward consumption and entertainment, in which art becomes mere fodder for the life process of society. This admittedly

⁴¹⁵ Berlant 5, 2.

⁴¹⁶ Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance" in Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought (New York: Penguin, 2006), orig. published as Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought (New York: Viking, 1961); Arendt, "Society and Culture," Daedalus 89.2 (Spring 1960): 284.

idiosyncratic theory of culture, which emphasizes the distressing consequences of art's proximity to life in modernity, offers a valuable opportunity to reassess the ideology of vitality structuring Rice's work as well as the artistic output of the NAC and the 1960s American avant-garde more broadly.

To take advantage of this opportunity, we cannot simply apply Arendt's insights to the study of avant-garde film. We will also need to complicate her insistence on the unworldly character of intimacy and vitality, as I demonstrate later in this chapter through recourse to Georges Bataille's examination of the seemingly paradoxical role of what he terms "project" in the otherwise directionless and meaningless movements of inner experience.⁴¹⁷ Before turning to Bataille, however, I seek in the following section to draw out certain limitations in Arendt's theoretical framework by expanding on a concept she herself employs in *The Human Condition*: that of the "non-world." This rather strange social form embodies the NAC's ambivalence about worldliness in a particularly succinct and productive fashion, unifying the otherwise disparate spaces of intimate experience and relationality that artists such as Rice hoped to generate through cinema. As I demonstrate, while the ephemeral dynamic of non-worldly environments underscores the ultimate precarity of intimacy, these environments also provide a crucial forum for elaborating alternative modes of intimate practice that would otherwise go unrecognized. If Rice's life and films were oriented around efforts to produce and sustain non-worldly formations, his failure to permanently inhabit such formations should be weighed against his success in representing them in a simultaneously durable and vital cinematic form, rendering the intimate dynamic of the fleeting environs through which he passed available for those who wish to reanimate them.

⁴¹⁷ Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1988).

III. Intimate Life and The Crisis in Culture

Arendt's most direct discussion of intimate experience comes in *The Human Condition*. As I note in my first chapter, she initially defines intimacy as an inner, subjective mode of existence standing in opposition to the conformism of modern society. Intimacy was "discovered," she explains, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Romanticists during their "rebellion... against society's unbearable perversion of the human heart, its intrusion upon an innermost region in man which until [the modern age] had needed no special protection."⁴¹⁸ But her descriptions of intimacy over the course of *The Human Condition* diverge from this initial definition in crucial ways, and in fact align intimacy contradictorily with the natural "life process" she perceives as the driving force of society itself.

Indeed, over the course of *The Human Condition*, intimacy is characterized primarily by its transience and opacity, rendering it comparable in important respects to the inherently futile and private activities that Arendt associates with *zōē*, the particular form of life that involves "biological" activities such as labor and consumption that are necessary to the maintenance of living organisms, but which remain ephemeral and murky because they leave no trace and are irrelevant to others. "The intimacy of the heart... has no objective tangible place in the world," Arendt asserts, and intimacy's intensely subjective nature renders it incompatible with the demand for commonality and legibility governing the public realm of appearance.⁴¹⁹ "[T]he greatest forces of intimate life," she explains, such as "the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the

⁴¹⁸ Arendt, *Human Condition* 39.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid 39.

delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance.”⁴²⁰ In such passages, the fluid, opaque contents of what Arendt tellingly refers to as “intimate life” are rendered analogous to the experiences of pain and pleasure, sorrow and bliss that accompany activities of labor and consumption – bodily activities through which individuals respond to the exigencies of life and by which human life attains its very “liveliness and vitality.”⁴²¹ While engaged in these and other bodily endeavors, the body is “thrown back upon itself,” Arendt argues, into a purely private, even animalistic experiential state whose “intensity is so great and [whose] force so elementary that... it blacks out all other worldly reality,” leaving one within the incommunicable confines of bodily sensation.⁴²²

Arendt makes the relationship between intimacy and life more explicit in a later work, *The Life of the Mind*, which helps to elucidate this connection in her thought. In a fascinating section of this work entitled “Body and soul; soul and mind,” Arendt expands on her discussion of intimate experience by affiliating what *The Human Condition* describes as the peculiarly modern experience of intimacy with a longer history of philosophical discourse on the soul. As Arendt explains, the inherent opacity and fluidity of the “feelings, passions, and emotions” that comprise the inner “life of the soul” are similar in many respects to the inner organs of the human body.⁴²³ Much like our inner organs, which were intended to remain hidden from view, and which exist therefore outside the realm of appearance, the impulses of the soul do not manifest themselves in a

⁴²⁰ Ibid 50.

⁴²¹ Ibid 120; see also 140.

⁴²² Ibid 113, 120, 112.

⁴²³ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978) 31.

common or easily communicable form. Contrary to human speech, which can be clearly heard and comprehended by others, the soul has its own “language,” a distinctly “physical” language that is expressed primarily by “glance, gesture, [and] inarticulate sound,” and is thus comparable to modes of communication employed by “higher animal species.”⁴²⁴ The moods and emotions that characterize the inner life process are also defined by a “continual change [that] is in no way different from the continual change of our bodily organs.”⁴²⁵ Moreover, according to Arendt, the “passions and emotions of our soul are not only body-bound [like our organs], they seem to have the same life-sustaining and preserving functions as [these] organs,” in that they provide the basic urges and instinctual responses that are necessary for sexual reproduction and survival.⁴²⁶ The inner experiences of intimate life are here positioned as both analogs and extensions of the material register of the body that inevitably renders all human beings subject to the life process.

It is by no means novel to remark on intimacy’s relationship to necessity, reproduction, and the body. But Arendt’s emphasis on intimacy’s vital, biological character has significant implications for any effort to enlist it in a project of world building. Her insistence on the relationship between intimate experience and the life process suggests that intimacy is fundamentally opposed to, or even destructive of worldly stability. Indeed, she considers “life’s chief character, with respect to the world,” to be its ability “to wear down durability” and describes the two main activities affiliated with the life process – labor and consumption – as “devouring processes that seize and

⁴²⁴ Ibid 33, 32.

⁴²⁵ Ibid 32.

⁴²⁶ Ibid 35.

destroy matter...”⁴²⁷ Intimacy’s imbrication with life therefore renders the notion of an “intimate world” an essentially oxymoronic one in her theoretical system. Like other intensely subjective experiences such as pain and love, intimacy is held by Arendt to be inherently “unworldly”: it lacks entirely in the stable objectivity of the human artifice, and even actively unsettles it.⁴²⁸

Arendt addresses the unworldly character of intimacy explicitly in a provocative section of *The Human Condition* on “The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art,” noted briefly in my previous chapter. Echoing her discussion of the “deprivatiz[ing]” work required to make intimate experiences public, as well as her references to the animalistic “language of the soul,” she here contrasts “mere attributes of the human animal like feelings, wants, and needs” with “capacities of man” that transcend and transform these attributes, such as thought, exchange, and usage.⁴²⁹ While human attributes are associated with privacy and the life process, capacities are “world-open and communicative” by nature.⁴³⁰ For instance, when an individual employs the capacity of thought, the “mute and inarticulate despondency” of that individual’s feeling is given an impersonal, objective shape (such as a book or an artwork) through which it is made to appear to others in a recognizable and verifiable form.⁴³¹ This process of reification, whereby an aspect of living experience is rendered into a fixed, tangible thing, transforms a “passionate intensity [imprisoned] within the self” into something “fit to

⁴²⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition* 100.

⁴²⁸ As she states quite clearly in *The Life of the Mind*, quoting from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*: “‘No fixed and abiding self can present itself in this flux of inner appearances,’ as Kant observed repeatedly. Actually it is misleading to speak even of inner ‘appearances’; all we know are inner sensations whose relentless succession prevents any of them from assuming a lasting, identifiable shape... Emotions and ‘inner sensations’ are ‘unworldly’ in that they lack the chief worldly property of ‘standing still and remaining’ at least long enough to be clearly perceived...” (39-40).

⁴²⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition* 168.

⁴³⁰ Ibid 168.

⁴³¹ Ibid 168.

enter the world,” allowing it to serve as a stable reference point for the establishment of common experience, and to endure the constant change enacted by the life process.⁴³²

Capacities are therefore essential to the construction and maintenance of the human artifice, while attributes, which Arendt affiliates with the passions and delights of intimate experience, are said to bear no relation to that world. In a peculiar moment, Arendt underscores this worldlessness by stating that, even if such attributes somehow managed “to constitute a man-made environment for the human animal,” this environment would be a mere “non-world, the product of emanation rather than of creation.”⁴³³

Arendt does not elaborate on this enigmatic notion of the non-world in *The Human Condition*. However, her brief discussion of this “man-made environment” comprised solely of “emanation[s]” is worth parsing. Though Arendt insists that such a realm would lack the shape and stability of a world, she nevertheless affords it a relatively delimited form, conceiving of it as a distinct entity or “environment,” and thereby conceding a certain productive potential to intimate and vital impulses. When human interactions are mediated by the “passionate intensit[ies]” of intimacy, or those psychical, emotional, and bodily urges that are not “fit to enter the world,” such interactions are not purely fruitless; they are generative, Arendt allows, of an impermanent, yet palpable experiential realm where shapeless impulses hold sway, undisciplined by dominant social conventions or normative rules of public appearance.

There is a certain correspondence between the non-world Arendt here imagines and Robert Park’s notion of the “moral regions” that pepper urban locales (which I

⁴³² Ibid 168.

⁴³³ Ibid 168.

discuss in detail in the previous chapter).⁴³⁴ Though Arendt conceives the non-world as a rootless social form that flashes up temporarily rather than the stable, geographical locales on which Park focuses, her description of the non-world suggests a similarly opaque, “vagrant” environ as that analyzed by Park – a space in which traditionally private experiences become strikingly displaced, assuming a disarmingly public character in a manner that disturbs clear-cut distinctions between inner and outer domains. Being comprised entirely of emanations, such a realm would certainly not partake of worldliness in any traditional sense, given that the term “emanation” (from the Latin *emanare*, to flow out) is associated not only with fluidity and immateriality, but also with thinness, weakness, and fragility. Yet participation in a non-world would necessarily entail a level of publicness, involving individuals in volatile, affective relations with others through which intimate experiences could be verified and a sort of recognition could be gained.

Arendt’s invocation of the non-world is essentially a rhetorical gesture employed as a way of conveying the *unheimlich* situation she believed would result from a complete loss of reification in modern society. For Arendt, the possibility of such a loss was tied to the rise of a social realm oriented almost solely around consumption at the expense of fabrication, a development that seemed poised to jeopardize the very “world which man creates as his home on earth” by doing away with worldliness altogether.⁴³⁵ But despite these rhetorical origins, the concept of the non-world is uniquely applicable to studies of the NAC for two basic reasons.

⁴³⁴ Robert E. Park, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment” in *The City*, Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967) 40-46.

⁴³⁵ Ibid 168.

First, Arendt's description of the non-world as a fluid environment saturated with intimacy resonates quite nicely with the unruly social forms and subcultural gatherings that artists of the NAC such as Rice worked incessantly to discover, produce, and represent. An unstable and rootless, yet passionate and vitalizing realm swirling with inner experience is precisely what films such as *The Flower Thief*, *Pull My Daisy*, *The Connection*, *Guns of the Trees*, and *Come Back, Africa* seek to create through scenes of improvised performance and intimate exchange. But crucially, whereas Arendt's affiliation of the intimate with an animalistic mode of experience and communication limit non-worldly formations to irrational crowds rather than of speaking and acting publics, the NAC's depictions of such formations reveal a more complex interplay of intimacy and publicity operative within a non-world.

Second, the designation *non-world* expresses the tension between vitality and durability that is so evident in the work of the NAC with a poignancy that is lacking from more familiar terms circulating within contemporary public sphere theory, such as "intimate public sphere" or "counterpublic." For example, because the prefix *non-* can indicate an environment that is not identical to or involved with the world, the concept *non-world* evokes the sense of detachment from dominant society that the NAC struggled to achieve through its filmic rebellion, and also conveys these artists' more radical effort to subvert worldly stability as a way of retaining contact with life. *Non-world* therefore positively expresses the difference that is so essential to alternative cultural formations and affirms that there exist forms of activity that do not conform to the deadening logic of reification. However, because *non-* also indicates a more negative lack of worldliness, the designation *non-world* also gestures toward the apparent futility of any attempt to regain

an experience of shelter or belonging by relinquishing stability and durability. It thus accounts for the stubborn persistence of complaints about homelessness in the films and writings produced by this movement throughout its rebellion.

Along with accurately describing the vagrant social forms that appear throughout the NAC's homeless movies, the term *non-world* encapsulates the peculiar predicament in which artists such as Rice found themselves while elaborating intimate worlds. Because these artists were attempting to break from a dominant socio-cultural formation whose oppressiveness was felt to reside in its excessively reified and reifying character, their rebellion took shape as a rejection of worldliness itself. However, they still longed for the sense of personal and cultural stability that only something like a world could provide. Members of the NAC were thus seeking shelter, but they wanted shelter from reification; they were striving to produce a world, but a world without worldliness.

Arendt elaborates on the complexities and limitations of intimate world building in a related argument published in two different forms at the beginning of the 1960s: first as the essay "Society and Culture," which appeared in a special issue of *Daedalus* on "Mass Culture and Mass Media" in 1960; and then as "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance," an expanded chapter in her 1961 collection of essays, *Between Past and Future*. In both of these works, Arendt extends her analysis of the opposition between worldliness and life by focusing specifically on the role that artworks and cultural practice have played in the maintenance of worldliness. The cultural "crisis" she identifies in these works stems from a dramatic transformation to classical conceptions of art effected by the rise of mass society, whose radically novel cultural

analog (“what we call mass culture”) problematizes the very possibility of culture itself.⁴³⁶

Arendt’s attempt at art history in these essays rests on a deeply nostalgic narrative of modernity. Works of art were initially created, she contends, as useless objects of pure appearance and endurance, or man-made things meant to persist in the world throughout the ages as testaments to the greatness of past civilizations. They were thus intended to be removed from spheres of utility and consumption, in which worldly objects are progressively worn down or devoured in the course of daily life. From Arendt’s perspective, it is only where the endurance of art is assured through this removal that one can speak of culture in the strict sense of the term. For if culture designates the particular “mode of intercourse prescribed by [different] civilizations with respect to the least useful and most worldly of things, the works of artists, poets, musicians, philosophers, and so forth,” then the proper form for this mode of intercourse to assume is surely that of “loving care,” given the fact that “‘culture’ derives from *colere*—to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend and preserve...”⁴³⁷ In this framework, a culture is constituted through the active protection of artistic objects from the destructiveness of natural life processes, and this practice is crucial to ensuring the existence and endurance of a common world.

The emergence of mass culture, according to Arendt, represents a radical break from such traditional configurations of art and culture. As the worldly disposition of a true “consumers’ society,” mass culture exhibits a novel disregard for artistic durability, striving instead to produce ever-new forms of entertainment for the purpose of immediate consumption – an orientation that reveals mass culture to be no culture at all, but rather

⁴³⁶ Arendt, “Society and Culture” 284.

⁴³⁷ Arendt, “Crisis in Culture” 210, 208.

an “anticultural” process.⁴³⁸ If culture is understood as “a phenomenon of the world,” or a mode of caring for worldly things, then entertainment must be distinguished as “a phenomenon of life,” Arendt reasons, or a mode of tending to and sustaining the life process of society.⁴³⁹ In the “culture” of entertainment, worldly things are approached as mere resources for amusement, ephemeral consumer goods that, like food products, are “necessary for... [the] preservation and recuperation [of human life],” but which cannot survive the moment of consumption.⁴⁴⁰ Through consumption, cultural objects lose their very thingness; they are functionalized, made to fulfill a basic need of society or the individual in an effort “to satisfy the growing appetites of a life process whose vital energy, no longer spent in the toil and trouble of a laboring body, must be used up by consumption...”⁴⁴¹ The danger that Arendt attributes to entertainment does not lie in its failure to be artistic, therefore, but in its “biological” proclivity for drawing more and more worldly things into its destructive metabolism.

As an index of the artistic realm’s subsumption by the social, the decay of culture represents the apogee of Arendt’s theory of modernization. Indeed, “Society and Culture” and “The Crisis in Culture” position this subsumption as a particularly distressing intensification of the “unnatural growth of the natural” that Arendt identifies in *The Human Condition* as a defining event of the modern age.⁴⁴² Because Arendt viewed individual art works as spectacular crystallizations of worldly stability, or objects whose potential immortality seemed to condense the durability of the human artifice with an unmatched “purity and clarity,” she took the increasingly consumable character of art in

⁴³⁸ Arendt, “Society and Culture” 286.

⁴³⁹ Arendt, “Crisis in Culture” 204.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid 203.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid 207.

⁴⁴² Arendt, *Human Condition* 47.

mass society as an indication that the life process had penetrated into even “the worldliest” of all worldly realms.⁴⁴³ The artist is still singled out in *The Human Condition* as “the only ‘worker’ left” in a society increasingly restricted to labor and consumption.⁴⁴⁴ “Society and Culture” and “The Crisis in Culture” foreclose on this option, equating the rise of mass culture with a dramatic decline of reification, fabrication, and worldly permanence more generally. In other words, art’s replacement by entertainment is positioned in these two essays as confirmation that the world previously created by *homo faber* and formerly cared for by agents of culture had devolved into a non-world, a fleeting social environment mediated solely by “mere attributes of the human animal.”

Arendt’s narrative of cultural decline, however polemical or hyperbolic, generates productive tensions when placed in dialogue with discourse surrounding the NAC. These tensions emerge from the radically divergent investments in vitality and worldliness, and intimacy and stability that structure these discourses.

For instance, Arendt’s analysis of mass culture’s startling vitalization of the artistic realm conflicts markedly with the stated ambitions of the NAC, dedicated as this movement was to countering the “dead[ness]” of conventional artistic products with an explicitly lively mode of film practice, one that would remain “rough, unpolished, but alive.”⁴⁴⁵ By characterizing entertainment as a “phenomenon of life,” Arendt troubles the NAC’s efforts to pursue a living cinema in direct opposition to mass culture. If critical statements of the NAC typically emphasize Hollywood’s perpetuation of tired formal and thematic conventions when declaiming the moribund state of postwar mass culture,

⁴⁴³ Ibid 168; Arendt, “Crisis in Culture” 206.

⁴⁴⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition* 127.

⁴⁴⁵ “The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group” in *Film Culture Reader*, 83.

Arendt turns our attention to the actual social function of mass cultural products, revealing how mass society's "mode of intercourse" with entertainment commodities parallels life-sustaining practices of consumption. Moreover, though intimacy is not evoked explicitly in "Society and Culture" or "The Crisis in Culture," Arendt's description of entertainment as fulfilling the vital "needs" of human animals, "whether the needs in question are of a high or a low order," resonates in suggestive ways with her association of intimacy with vitality in *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*. Within Arendt's framework, the becoming-vital of culture in modernity is also a becoming-intimate: the art work is no longer a reified object of pure appearance serving the establishment of a common, public world, but rather a transient consumer good oriented toward the opaque register of subjective, bodily needs. From this perspective, the NAC's demands that cinema be made more personal, domestic, or physical seem perplexing and redundant.

Even more importantly, Arendt's analysis of the vital dimensions of entertainment complicates the NAC's belief that late-modern alienation could be remedied through a vivification of art and film. It is precisely the influx of life into the formerly inanimate artistic sphere that Arendt credits with reducing the world modern man had inherited as his "home on earth" to a fluid, transitory environment, one incapable of reliably sheltering private life or of adequately grounding common experience. Whereas artists of the NAC blame the inhospitable rigidity of American mass culture for stifling inner expression and impeding communal belonging, Arendt attributes the homelessness suffered by the modern individual to the dynamic vitality of her/his surrounding culture,

blaming the increasingly “nomadic” existence of the denizens of mass society on the decline of reification under modernity.⁴⁴⁶

Arendt’s classicist writings on art and culture would have appeared highly conservative to members of the NAC, invested as she was in notions of form, skilled craftsmanship, and eternal beauty. Affiliates of the NAC were prone to advocating not only for an abandonment of form and technique, but also for a view of art as “disposable” and “temporary,” if not more explicitly consumable.⁴⁴⁷ When viewed through Arendt’s theoretical framework, both the “anticultural” dynamic of popular entertainment and the “countercultural” films of the NAC appear as mere variations on a theme of life, or alternative expressions of what Arendt describes in *The Human Condition* as the distinctively modern “assumption that life, and not the world, is the highest good of man...”⁴⁴⁸ Though this elision of the difference separating popular culture from the avant-garde is reductive, the strange parallels that Arendt reveals between these apparently opposed cultural manifestations allows us to perceive an important limitation in the NAC’s world-building project.

Even as artists of this movement strove to embrace and amplify the inherent volatility of human affairs, they simultaneously complained of the shelterlessness and alienation they suffered in the absence of a relatively stable, alternative world in which

⁴⁴⁶ Arendt, “Crisis in Culture” 206.

⁴⁴⁷ See especially Stan Vanderbeek, “Movies, Disposable Art, Synthetic Media and Artificial Intelligence,” Take One 1.2 (January-February 1969); and Dick Higgins, “Intending,” The Something Else Newsletter 1.3 (April 1966): n.p. It is interesting to note that Arendt’s comparison of the entertainment industry’s ephemeral wares with the perishable goods manufactured by a bakery – “*Panis et circenses* truly belong together; both are necessary for life, for its preservation and recuperation, and both vanish in the course of the life process” – is restated in positive terms in a 1969 “Movie Journal” column, in which Mekas locates the political value of avant-garde films in their capacity to “sustain man, spiritually, like bread does, like rain does, like rivers, like mountains, like sun” (Arendt, “Crisis in Culture” 202; Mekas, Movie Journal 352). Mekas has also written: “enjoyment of cinema as food – let the image, screen drip over your eyes like when you enjoy food” (To Petrarca [Paris: Dis Voir, 2009] 6).

⁴⁴⁸ Arendt, Human Condition 318.

nonconventional values, sensibilities, and modes of living could be both privately cultivated and publicly recognized. Arendt's theory of culture reveals that the NAC's longing for such a reliable, alternative world was incompatible with their desire for a vital, living cinema. If a world's ability to function as a stabilizing "home" for human life is truly dependent on that world's immutable, reified character, then the NAC's interest in fabricating a hospitable, alternative world defined by its animating volatility was doomed from the outset. Arendt's analysis of the necessity of reification to habitation thus forces us to reevaluate the NAC's attempts to rectify homelessness through the pursuit of an unstructured vitality.

To note the challenge Arendt poses to discourse on the NAC is not to argue for an "Arendtian" reading of this film culture. I am interested instead in considering the value of a comparative analysis of these conflicting, contemporaneous discourses that reveals the limitations structuring both. Just as Arendt's concerns about cultural vitality undercut the avant-garde's desire to merge art and life, the NAC's historical success in mobilizing the dream of a living cinema toward the creation of an impressive, if perpetually vulnerable, network of alternative cultural organizations prompts us to interrogate Arendt's insistence that life and worldliness occupy mutually exclusive domains. This dream did not only animate the formation of a host of alternative institutions dedicated to the production, distribution, exhibition, criticism, and even preservation of personal cinema. It also resonated with communities dispersed throughout the world and spread across multiple generations who have contributed to the maintenance of avant-garde film culture since the 1960s, thereby ensuring the paradoxical persistence of the NAC's ideology of presentness. If Arendt asks us to reexamine the radical claims that continue to

be yoked to that ideology, the remarkable longevity of the American avant-garde demonstrates the importance of questioning Arendt's narrative of modernity as a process of cultural decline.

Arendt's theories of art and culture are also complicated when we apply them to the study of film. Her view of the artwork as a crystallization of worldly permanence can be seen quite clearly by examining cinema's fundamental dependence on aspects of both worldliness and vitality. If the co-presence of these two attributes has figured in a wide range of critical and theoretical writings on film, perhaps most famously in André Bazin's view of cinema as "change mummified," this medium's paradoxical fusion of stasis and dynamism, objectivity and motion, fabrication and animation was also central to Rice's conception of film practice.⁴⁴⁹ By examining Rice's effort to develop a conceptual framework capable of holding together both the wildness of life and the order of worldliness, we can put pressure on some of Arendt's basic assumptions about art, while also expanding on existing accounts of Rice's work. To do so, it will be necessary to draw from a variety of Rice's personal and public writings composed during the years he was active as a filmmaker, but to retain a focus on his initial production, *The Flower Thief*. This focus is warranted not only because Rice began to formulate his ideas about film aesthetics during the time he was actively engaged in producing and exhibiting this work. It also continued to function as a crucial reference point for Rice throughout his subsequent writings on and forays into film practice, serving as a sort of constant source or spring for his thoughts on cinema.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁹ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1967) 15.

⁴⁵⁰ In addition to referencing *The Flower Thief* in publications such as "A Statement" and "Foundation for the Invention and Creation of Absurd Movies," Rice also wrote and spoke occasionally of producing some

IV. Wild Geometrics

Few commentators on *The Flower Thief* have failed to remark on the commitment to presentness exhibited by this film. Often hailed as a sort of apogee of the NAC's aesthetic of immediacy ("a peak of spontaneous cinema," "the purest expression of the Beat sensibility in cinema," "the beatnik film *par excellence*"), *The Flower Thief* lends itself quite willingly to the celebration of vitality that continues to inflect critical discourse on this film culture.⁴⁵¹ Rice's investment in presentness can be found operating in the film at multiple, interrelated levels, including those of style, narrative, and mode of production, as well as in Rice's broader conceptualization of this work. And though this section will demonstrate the need to complicate our understanding of that investment by drawing on a range of Rice's writings about film that elucidate how his attraction to cinema's vitality was intricately bound up with his commitment to technique, it is first necessary to examine the central role that presentness played in the production of *The Flower Thief*.

The numerous registers of presentness at play in Rice's film are delineated rather nicely in what is, perhaps, the first critical response this work provoked. In a brief essay that appeared initially as program notes for the film's "world premiere" at the Contemporary Dancers Foundation (CDF) in San Francisco, but which was also reprinted

form of sequel to the film. For instance, in his 1962 interview with Mary Batten, Rice says of his aborted project for a film set entirely in Venice, CA, "I could have made THE SON OF THE FLOWER THIEF [but] I couldn't get going" (Batten 35). Rice makes a similar remark as late as April 16, 1964 in a letter to Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky written in Acapulco, in which Rice states, "the hot-blooded flower thief rides again in search of swamps and shipwrecks for my new movie" (Rice, "Diaries" 116.)

⁴⁵¹ Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Village Voice* 14 September 1961: 10; Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 300; J. Hoberman, "Pull My Daisy The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man" in *The American New Wave, 1958-1967* ed. Melinda Ward (Buffalo, NY: Walker Art Center, 1982) 38.

in the small arts journal, *Contemporary*, that was published by the CDF, the writer, choreographer, and then-director of the CDF, J Marks (aka Jay Marks, aka Jamake Highwater), notes how Rice's commitment to spontaneity manifests itself in *The Flower Thief*'s content and technique, as well as Rice's more general creative process. Marks also frames this commitment through recourse to a familiar theme of homelessness.

Quoting Rice's own description of *The Flower Thief* as "a true cinematic expression of the 'hip' and 'beat' philosophy" that seeks to depict North Beach culture "without a moral to intrude upon the action" and with an emphasis on "spontaneous antics, without too much contrived staging – all too common in the planned film," Marks then argues that Rice's impromptu method of filmmaking gives *The Flower Thief* "the freedom of an essentially irresponsible artist who permits his imagination to carry him wherever fancy or a temporary stimulation takes him."⁴⁵² For Marks, Rice's meandering approach to production, driven by fancy rather than a preformed plan, carries over into the film's content as well. *The Flower Thief* constitutes "an artful rendering of a wandering sickness," he explains, or a depiction of an experience of homelessness suffered by members of the Beat generation, those "out-casts, nerdo-wells, ... experimenters... [and] unfixed personalities" whose rootlessness is the result of their "determination or failure to be assimilated into a society which [they] either rejected as false or which rejects the misfit."⁴⁵³ This evasion of fixity and social convention also impacts the film's anarchic form, which Marks describes as resulting from a similarly

⁴⁵² J Marks, "The Flower Thief," *Contemporary* 1-2 (1960): 4. Though Marks bills the CDF's screening as *The Flower Thief*'s "world premiere," the film appears to have been screened initially at the North Beach arts space, The Coffee Gallery, in an earlier form. See Sargeant 83; and McCarney. Taylor Mead also references a pair of early, public screenings, the location of which is not specified, in a correspondence with Rice from the summer of 1960. See: Mead, letter to Ron Rice, 16 June 1960, Reginald Gay Collection; and letter to Ron Rice, 20 June 1960, Reginald Gay Collection. However, Rice confirms that the CDF gave *The Flower Thief* its "first run" in a 1962 interview in *Film Comment*. See Batten 34.

⁴⁵³ Ibid 4.

vagrant determination “to avoid technique” and dispense with classical notions of artistic authority.⁴⁵⁴ As with other of the NAC’s homeless movies, social alienation is here positioned by Marks as the condition of the film’s production that motivates Rice’s cultivation of an improvisatory, spontaneous lifestyle, before bleeding into the subject and formal composition of Rice’s film. Yet importantly, the ambivalence of this experience is underscored by Marks. Homelessness is suffered as a sickness but also adopted as a strategy, or a means for exploring new forms of creative “freedom” and new occasions for sensory “stimulation.”⁴⁵⁵

Marks’ description of Rice’s film is accurate in many respects. *The Flower Thief* does portray in its subject matter the spontaneous, transient lifestyle promoted by the Beats. And Rice did adopt an intensely low budget and impromptu mode of production when shooting and editing the film, which resulted in the purposely crude, pseudo-*naïf* aesthetic celebrated by critics of his work. Just as *The Flower Thief* patches together a vague narrative out of loosely related sequences depicting an unnamed protagonist (Taylor Mead) as he meanders about the North Beach area of San Francisco, whiling away the time and interacting in improvisatory ways with various beatniks, authority figures, and inanimate objects, the film consistently employs markers of amateurism and contingency to heighten the sense of immediacy and ephemerality conveyed by the film’s content, utilizing handheld camerawork, natural lighting, location shooting, and non-professional actors, while also retaining a wide variety of audio-visual imperfections (over- and under-exposed footage, variations in volume, seemingly extraneous multiple

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid 18.

⁴⁵⁵ For another reading of *The Flower Thief* as a distinctly Beat expression of homelessness, see the Reverend Al Carmines’s sermon on the film, “Saint Francis and The Flower Thief,” originally delivered at the Judson Memorial Church on August 12th, 1962, but reprinted in *Film Culture* 39 (Winter, 1965), esp. 125.

exposures, etc.) As Rice's own description of the film in Marks' program notes makes clear, *The Flower Thief* emphasizes action and spontaneity over coherence and professionalism in an effort to accurately reflect the North Beach way of life.

Rice's approach to filmmaking was thus deeply imbricated in the broader "culture of spontaneity" elaborated by the post-WWII American avant-garde, which the cultural historian Daniel Belgrad has examined at length in *The Culture of Spontaneity*.⁴⁵⁶ *The Flower Thief* stands as one, particularly celebrated contribution to this culture whose effort to "explore and record the spontaneous creative act" manifested itself in a variety of artistic media and disciplines, including poetry, music, painting, dance, ceramics, and film.⁴⁵⁷ Though Rice sometimes framed his interest in improvisation as an outgrowth of necessity, or a result of his lack of the financial resources required to "stage events throughly [sic]," he also believed that film's capacity to register unpredictable occurrences, accidents, and concrete details afforded it a privileged relationship to spontaneity.⁴⁵⁸ Film appeared to Rice to be uniquely equipped to extend what Belgrad identifies as the "aesthetic of presence" that the Beats, mimicking improvisational jazz musicians, sought to incorporate into their poetry through an emphasis on public readings, which Belgrad describes as performative "events taking place in real space and time, [which] shared with life itself an element of contingency that written texts lacked."⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁶ Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998).

⁴⁵⁷ Belgrad 1. As Deane M. Williams has noted, film is conspicuously absent from Belgrad's otherwise wide-ranging analysis of postwar American art (Williams, "Street Life: Between the New Deal and Direct Cinema," presentation at Visible Evidence 18 conference, New York University, New York City, 14 August 2011).

⁴⁵⁸ Rice, "A Statement," *Film Culture* 25 (1962): 71, reprinted in *Film Culture* 39 (Winter 1965): 120.

⁴⁵⁹ Belgrad 218, 219.

The import Rice placed on presentness can be seen quite clearly in his “Ode to the Eye,” a brief statement Rice composed in 1961 that underscores the affective force of the unplanned film and celebrates its ability to revitalize what he perceived to be a dwindling realm of inner experience. The complexity of this statement and its significance to discourse on the NAC (it has been printed in at least four separate issues of *Film Culture*) warrants its reproduction here in full. I have again retained Rice’s original spelling and punctuation:

About that time it was decided by the Gods that reality was more important than creation. The reality of anything moves the spirit more than artificial attempts to create motion where there is static.

A drunkard struggling in the alley to remove the cap from the wine bottle strikes the emotions with more force and meaning than any logical sequence of staged events that don’t have the fibre of life.

Any scene, no matter what, can evoke more of man to believe and feel than a parallelism which contains logic without reality.

It is better to film anything that is living and real than to film ideas of what should, or might be real.⁴⁶⁰

In this rather tangled defense of cinematic realism, Rice praises film’s ability to capture what he terms the “fibre of life” by presenting the reality of an event or scene in an essentially unmediated manner that allows it to “[strike] the emotions” and “[move] the spirit” with an intensity that cannot be matched by any film rooted in artifice. Recasting Arendt’s view of artistic creation as reification in decidedly negative terms, Rice here seems to envision filmmaking as a strangely *uncreative* artistic practice, a process of

⁴⁶⁰ “Ode to the Eye” was originally published in Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema,” *Film Culture* 24 (1962). It was later included as part of Rice’s longer statement, “Dazendada Works,” *Film Culture* 29 (1963), which was reprinted in *Film Culture* 39 (Winter 1965). “Ode to the Eye” was also printed in its original form, as a typewritten statement with handwritten notation sent by Rice to Jonas Mekas, as “Ron Rice Note to Jonas Mekas” in *Film Culture* 70/71 (1983), where it is dated by Rice from “Mon. Nov. 22, 1961” (158). This document is also reprinted in Mekas, *Jonas Mekas: Artists’ Book* (Paris: Onestar, 2003). I have retained Rice’s original spelling, punctuation, and style.

reproducing, without altering, the inherently dynamic character of life in an effort to “evoke more of man to believe and feel.”⁴⁶¹

“Ode to the Eye” succeeds in conveying Rice’s interest in life as an unstructured, illogical domain. But it is ultimately a misleading representation of Rice’s views on film aesthetics when read outside the broader context of his other writings on art and cinema. Despite Rice’s frequent denunciation of planned, staged, artificial, and coherent films in statements such as “Ode to the Eye,” he was actually deeply invested in the craft of filmmaking, and he expended a considerable amount of effort planning and editing his projects in accordance with his views on film aesthetics. This side of Rice’s creative practice has not been documented by film history. It is therefore worth detailing here to provide a more comprehensive view of his approach to filmmaking.

Rice’s interest in craft becomes evident upon examining the personal journals he composed in the years following the production of *The Flower Thief*, some of which were published in a special issue of *Film Culture* from 1965 devoted to the writings of Rice and Maya Deren, and others of which are archived in a collection of paper materials surrounding the life of Taylor Mead at the New York Public Library (NYPL). These journals are littered with treatments for new film projects, sketches of locations, and diagrams of shots, sequences, and even short films, some of which feature detailed notes on technique including specifications for particular actions, camera angles, frame rates,

⁴⁶¹ Along with invoking the Kino-Eye theories of Dziga Vertov, which were a significant influence on Rice, the title “Ode to the Eye” also speaks to Rice’s belief in the image’s ability to revitalize the viewer’s body and spirit through the medium of vision. On Vertov, see: Rice, “A Statement”; and “Foundation for the Invention and Creation of Absurd Movies.” On the image, see especially Batten, “An Interview with Ron Rice” 33.

and sound and editing effects.⁴⁶² Demonstrating the amount of time Rice spent watching movies and thinking about film practice, his journals also contain frequent references to the films, writings, imagery, and techniques of various *auteurs*, actors, and movie critics, ranging from Griffith to Eisenstein, Dreyer, Humphrey Bogart, and James Agee. Many of Rice's writings also include comments regarding the value of film form and the significance of montage in particular. For example, one passage from notes for an unrealized film project contained in his posthumously published diaries describes editing as a highly artisanal process akin to a sort of tapestry. "How the things are revealed and when gives it the Art," Rice writes, before adding, "The cutting, the drama, the tension[,] all created from ordinary matter[,] the layers of meaning woven in the Cinema fabric."⁴⁶³ This comparison of editing to an intricate practice of weaving, where dramatic tension and meaning are constructed out of mere "ordinary matter," clearly departs from the realist perspective advanced in "Ode to the Eye" though it resonates strongly with the complex montage sequences, visual effects, and soundtracks composed for Rice's three completed films. But his polemics against "staging" are problematized even further by documents surrounding a different unrealized project: Rice's proposal for the establishment of a film production program devoted to "continu[ing] the aesthetic development of the Silent Motion Picture Film," which was to involve, among other things, "The construction of a movie studio" complete with "Lighting, Platforms, Backgrounds, Props, Controls, ect. [sic]," and focused periods of "Studio Filming" in

⁴⁶² In addition to the sketches and treatments to be found in Rice's posthumously published "Diaries" op. cit., see also: Rice, sketch of scene for *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, n.d., Reginald Gay Collection.

⁴⁶³ Rice, "Diaries" 102-103. This passage echoes the language of a note included at the bottom of a storyboard for another unrealized film, wherein Rice writes: "This is the surface of the scene. Now the 'how' these images play together begins the Cinema 'Art'" (ibid, 100).

which artists would explore “The transformation of real events in Space and Time into the ‘Plastic’ dimensions of the Cinema.”⁴⁶⁴

The period of time in which Rice shot *The Flower Thief* is not covered in either the aforementioned special issue of *Film Culture* or the NYPL’s paper materials collection. But documents dating from after the film’s initial exhibition reveal that Rice’s commitment to form and technique played a central role in the creation of this work, which Rice himself described as a reaction against “the planned film.” For instance, in a 1962 interview in *Film Comment* with Mary Batten, Rice details the incredibly meticulous process by which *The Flower Thief* was produced and edited, explaining that all three thousand feet of the footage he exposed throughout the production period was shot on fifty foot rolls of film (Ansco reversal machine-gun stock left over after WWII) that he had to hand-wind onto small daylight spools from twelve hundred foot cans of unexposed stock. He also explains that the soundtrack for the film was created through a laborious process that involved breaking the initial rough cut into ten minute sections, projecting each section, and then transferring relevant audio materials onto a quarter-inch tape recorder during playback. After the resulting, two-hour cut was exhibited to different audiences in San Francisco, Rice explains, he then decided to reedit the film, cutting it down to approximately 80-85 minutes. The cutting did not stop there, evidently. The version of *The Flower Thief* currently in distribution through the Film-Makers’ Cooperative has a runtime of just under 60 minutes.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶⁴ See Rice, “Plans for Work,” 29 November 1962, Reginald Gay Collection. Rice submitted this proposal for consideration to grants committees at the Whitney Foundation and Brown University.

⁴⁶⁵ Batten 32. In his 1962 review of *The Flower Thief*, Mekas notes seeing the film in “three different versions, a two-hour-long version, a forty-five-minute version, and now a seventy-minute version,” adding “It always works, no matter how long or how short it is” (Mekas, *Movie Journal* 63). The online catalog of the Pacific Film Archive notes that a 75-minute version apparently edited by Francis Rigney is the

Rice's decision to reedit and condense the original cut was the source of a dispute between Mead and himself. In a pair of letters sent to Rice in the summer of 1960 after a screening of *The Flower Thief* in San Francisco, Mead chastises Rice for editing down an earlier version of the film, stating that Rice had destroyed that version's simplicity and spontaneity, the accidental discontinuities of which Mead compares to "the elements of modern jazz."⁴⁶⁶ In an echo of Mekas's infamous critique of the "second version" of John Cassavetes' *Shadows*, Mead accuses Rice in a profanity-riddled diatribe of forcibly imposing a sense of "continuity" on *The Flower Thief* in a misguided effort to make the film more marketable.⁴⁶⁷ Rather than striving for a "shit ass Hollywood mass 8,000,000 dollar money mad worthless bore," Mead writes, Rice should "be content with a little 100,000 dollar epic that means something artistically and jazzistically baby."⁴⁶⁸ Rice's response, dismissively labeled "Memo to actor of movie," further illuminates his views on film form, asserting:

The essence of The Flower Thief is image. The moving image doing something, no matter how trite or sophisticated! The film is built on image and editing order [that are] a direct result of my unexplained genius to integrate abstract concepts into cinematic concepts of action. No Man can tell me how to make my film. After I have built these filmic ideas into projectable realities I refuse to take advice from anyone.⁴⁶⁹

Whether serious or self-mocking, Rice's defense of his edits reiterates a position he advances in other writings from this period, which was apparently the source of an earlier argument with Mead about the artistic basis of film: namely, Rice's belief that "the

"definitive version," according to Rigney (<http://oskicat.berkeley.edu/record=b10391981~S1>). This chapter refers to the version currently in distribution through the Film-Makers' Cooperative.

⁴⁶⁶ Mead, letter to Ron Rice, 16 June 1960, Reginald Gay Collection.

⁴⁶⁷ Mead, letter to Ron Rice, 20 June 1960, Reginald Gay Collection.

⁴⁶⁸ Mead, letter to Ron Rice, 16 June 1960.

⁴⁶⁹ Rice, memo to Taylor Mead, n.d., Reginald Gay Collection.

difference between a natural event and it [sic] appearance on the screen... makes film an art form.”⁴⁷⁰

Such statements reveal a side of Rice that differs considerably from that presented by contemporary scholarship on his work, in which Rice’s films have been framed, for instance, as exemplars of the American underground’s improvisatory “practice in the profilmic”; as anarchic expressions of a liberating philosophy of “play”; and as authentic manifestations of a Beat aesthetic of “purity and innocence” whose spontaneity and messiness has since been co-opted by the “*faux* primitivism” of American popular culture.⁴⁷¹ When we compare such descriptions of Rice’s work with his statements on the value of editing and technique, we would seem to be confronted with the existence of two separate Rices: on the one hand, a spontaneous realist invested in film as a conduit for life; on the other, a meticulous craftsman committed to artistic fabrication and control.

These versions of Rice are not wholly incompatible, however, as can be seen upon returning to Rice’s deceptively brief “Memo” to Mead. In this memo, Rice embraces the fabricated character of what he refers to as the “filmic ideas” contained in *The Flower Thief* and underscores the considerable work he put into creating and ordering these ideas. But he also insists that the final result of his work retains an intimate connection to reality. The film is a compilation of “projectable realities,” he states, or abstract concepts that have been concretized and infused with “action” through the filmic transcription of actual events enacted to realize such concepts. The intriguing fusion of the artificial and the real in this memo demonstrates that film was valued by Rice for

⁴⁷⁰ Rice, “Foundation for the Invention and Creation of Absurd Movies.” Rice here relates an argument with Mead about film art that occurred on the first day of shooting *The Flower Thief*.

⁴⁷¹ David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1989) 120-127; Sargeant 73; Ray Carney, “Escape Velocity: Notes on Beat Film” in *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950-1965* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995) 202-203.

facilitating a mode of artistic practice capable of melding his seemingly opposing investments in spontaneity and order, reality and fabrication, life and form. Like other artists of the NAC, Rice was trying to develop an employment of film craft whose products would be experienced as manifestations of pure life. He wanted to utilize form to convey a feeling of formlessness. The contradictions and inconsistencies that occur across his writings are the result of his attempt to elaborate the conceptual basis of an inherently paradoxical film practice, a sort of “foundation for the invention and creation of absurd movies” to borrow one of Rice’s own, internally redundant phrases.⁴⁷²

Rice’s interest in cinema’s paradoxical qualities points to the difficulties that arise from applying Arendt’s theory of art to the study of film. The distinction between life and world that underlies this theory is confounded by film, a medium whose specificity derives from a complex intermingling of these two realms. On the one hand, the process of photographic inscription at the base of filmic representation, whereby the flux of a real event is frozen and fixed onto a material strip of celluloid, conforms rather nicely to Arendt’s view of artistry as a reifying work, a practice centered on “the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things.”⁴⁷³ Indeed, the individual frame or photogram, whose stillness has frequently been associated with death, exemplifies Arendt’s characterization of the artwork as a “‘dead letter’ [that] replaces... the ‘living spirit,’” or an inert object in which an ephemeral action or occurrence attains representation in a durable, tangible form.⁴⁷⁴

On the other hand, when the still frame is activated through projection, the very thingy character of film’s material base dissolves into a fragile play of shadow and

⁴⁷² Rice, “Foundation” 17.

⁴⁷³ Arendt, Human Condition 95.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid 95.

movement. In the act of projection, static indices of reality are reanimated through a process of emanation by which they are resolved into an illusion of “life itself.” “Unlike the photograph, a movie watched in the correct conditions (24 frames a second, darkness) tends to be elusive,” Laura Mulvey notes, much like “running water, fire or the movement of trees in the wind...”⁴⁷⁵ Indexing the thorough confusion of life and world accomplished by the modern era from which it emerged, cinema harbors in its very form an uncanny co-presence of stillness and movement. It is a distinctly modern medium, simultaneously durable and ephemeral, objective and abstract, which encapsulates Arendt’s anxieties about the vitalization of art under modernity.

Though Arendt would have been suspicious of cinema’s internal contradictions, I would argue that the duality of cinema was crucial to Rice’s decision to pursue film practice as his primary mode of creative work. Rice’s attraction to film was motivated by a desire for worldliness-in-vitality similar to that which spurred his initial departure from the East Coast at the beginning of 1960, shortly after his decision to switch from painting to film. Film afforded Rice a sense of immersion in the real, a liveliness and unpredictability that he felt to be lacking not only from static iterations of the plastic arts, but also from the forms of entertainment manufactured by mass culture, and the monstrously artificial environment of New York City. But in addition to this liveliness, the workmanship involved in film practice appealed to his investment in aesthetic order and creative expression, allowing Rice to self-identify as a member of a marginal community of artists whose specialized knowledge set them apart from the mundane circuits of labor and consumption that defined daily life in the late-modern American

⁴⁷⁵ Laura Mulvey, Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 66.

city. Film thus seemed especially capable of remedying the absence of *both* belonging and inwardness that Rice experienced in New York. Its technical requirements facilitated his participation in a budding filmic underground as well as the broader '60s American avant-garde, while its dynamism and vitality provided him with a medium for reanimating his inner spirit and potentially that of others.

A journal entry Rice composed in Mexico City in the summer of 1963 speaks to either side of his attraction to cinema:

The most accurate name to describe Cinema is MAGIC. The witch doctor uses a weird looking black box, two circles of light metal form the shape of the box. Contained inside the total darkness of these circles is a mass of gelatinous substance which feels solid. By finding an edge of substance the witch doctor, with a quick pull can transform 'it' into a soft mass of swirling transparent plastic. The mushroom and bone which captures forever the very spirit of motion, and the sound of the spring rushing down the mountain...⁴⁷⁶

Rice here positions filmmaking as a specialized form of practice pursued by an elite and mysterious artist figure, whose transformative work revolves around a seemingly magical transposition of static, solid material into a vivifying illusion, one coursing with liquid dynamism. And the remainder of this entry, which takes up the better part of three pages in the issue of *Film Culture* devoted to Rice's writings, further elucidates his belief that cinema's fusion of wordliness and vitality could remedy the alienating effects of urban-industrial society.

His invocation of the "spirit of motion" in this passage in fact spurs a fervent composition of an unrealized film project that revolves around a mystical "Giant

⁴⁷⁶ Rice, "Diaries" 95, spacing modified. On Rice's investment in the artist as a privileged figure, see also his concern about the emergence of "New Realism" (Pop Art) in painting (Rice, "Diaries" 113-114). Rice also touches on this point in a letter he wrote in the fall of 1962 in which he complains of his mother's insistence that he support himself with a regular job: "the fool still expects me to be working in some gasoline station. can you imagine that, me, the flower of american [sic] cinema, of every cinema to fill the tanks of the 'drabs'" (letter to unknown recipient, 20 September 1962, Reginald Gay Collection.)

locomotive” that twists through “wild green mountains bearing the tremendous weight of Man born in the Cities of darkness... in search of something lost thousands of milleniums [sic] ago.”⁴⁷⁷ As the train races along, gushing green vomit onto the wooden ties (symbolic, Rice explains, “of all the shit we have to endure”), a man is found hunched inside a railroad car “desperately trying to rise up,” though he is “exhausted, sick, helpless.”⁴⁷⁸ When the man collapses into sleep, Rice envisions a euphoric dream scene clearly modeled after cinema itself, which appears in his journal under the heading: “THE LIGHTS OF SLEEP.” As the train enters a long tunnel, the newly darkened theater of the car explodes into an intimate, multi-sensory spectacle. A burst of “pure colors from the depths” suddenly “drifts through the black windows” carried by “radiating circles of sun stuff” that “[fill] the car with the temperature of crisp alto sax” and cycle rapidly through a “WILD GEOMETRICS OF PIN-POINTED FORMS.”⁴⁷⁹ This “symphony of all color” glazes upon the sleeping man’s body and then speaks to him more deeply, casting its “voices... into him” and filling him with “complementary shadows of the entire Universe” that reanimate a faint, forgotten region of “fallen dreams[,] foolish dreams,” effectively dusting off “the windows of our perception” and elevating the man’s soul into an eternal, cosmic realm (“the eye of the Bodidarhama [sic] Forever Motionless”).⁴⁸⁰

In this vision of cinema, film’s ethereal dynamism affords it access to a forgotten realm of inner experience nearly eradicated by modernity. And its capacity to order the opaque illuminations of interiority into recognizable forms, while also conveying those forms in an embodied, synaesthetic mode of address that reaches viewers in a dreamlike

⁴⁷⁷ Rice, “Diaries” 95.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid 97, 96.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid 97.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid 97.

state conducive to irrational experiences, provides it with an ability to counter the sickening effects of the modern world, reactivating the domain of spirit. Though I will have occasion to return to the mystical dimensions of Rice's thought in the coda to this chapter, here we can simply note that his vivid invocation of spectatorial experience in the "LIGHTS OF SLEEP" sequence overlaps in crucial ways with Arendt's description of non-worldly environments. Rice here envisions the space of cinematic reception as an intimate enclosure animated by the shadowy torrents of inner experience, one capable of undoing the deathly rigidity of the reified world, whose sickness had rendered it "pale and almost dead."⁴⁸¹ For Rice, cinema's value lay not only in its ability to facilitate and depict non-worldly formations at the levels of production and representation. He also celebrated this medium for its ability to generate new spaces of intimate encounter through the act of projection, emitting a sort of "dark incandescence" through which new forums for the cultivation of intimate experience could be activated at the level of exhibition.⁴⁸²

To adequately analyze this dream of cinema's poetic potential, we must turn to a consideration of the specific formal strategies through which Rice sought to mobilize that potential. His emphasis on film's chromatic character ("symphony of all color") in the journal entry above would seem to resonate more with the psychedelic superimpositions of *Chumlum* than the washed-out black-and-white cinematography of *The Flower Thief*. Yet Rice in fact strives in *The Flower Thief* to fabricate similarly animating scenarios as that described above, though this film locates these scenarios on (relatively) steadier ground. Rice's project in *The Flower Thief* centers on his effort to develop a means for

⁴⁸¹ Ibid 96.

⁴⁸² Bataille 47.

representing non-worldly environments in a highly fabricated, cinematic form that would nevertheless convey the “living spirit” of such environments rather than the “premonition of immortality” evoked by the beautiful artworks.⁴⁸³ To paraphrase Bataille, who I discuss in more detail below, the principle of this film could be stated as an attempt to emerge through reification from the realm of reification.

V. Pictures of the Non-World

Rice’s seemingly contradictory investments in life and worldliness figure strongly in *The Flower Thief*. In addition to inflecting his turn to filmmaking and the views on film aesthetics he developed during production, the search for an alternative home-space that drove Rice to California impacts the film at the levels of content and form. The errant, meandering narrative identified by Marks in fact dramatizes this search. Yet the “wandering sickness” of Mead’s character results not only from his “failure to be assimilated into... society,” but also from a more basic lack of a stable residence.⁴⁸⁴ The film depicts Mead as an accidental transient who, deprived of both shelter and belonging, spends his days seeking out a new basis for habitation that would not reproduce the stifling atmosphere of normative domestic and social realms. *The Flower Thief* narrates his struggle to locate a world replete with vitality, or to elaborate a stable basis for life that will not foreclose on life itself. The balancing act entailed by this pursuit, between the thrills of uncertainty and the comforts of stability, also manifests itself in Rice’s paradoxical form. To modify Marks’ assertion that *The Flower Thief*’s “technique is essentially found in its effort to avoid technique,” we can more accurately say that Rice

⁴⁸³ Arendt *Human Condition* 168, 169.

⁴⁸⁴ Marks 4.

strives for a careful employment of technique that will read like a natural evasion of technique.⁴⁸⁵

The opening sequence of *The Flower Thief* shows each side of Mead's homelessness, establishing him as a rootless figure detached from normative spheres of domesticity and labor, while also demonstrating Rice's careful attention to form. We are introduced to Mead after a brief credit sequence where hand-painted title cards nailed imperfectly to the façade of a decaying wooden structure are photographed in a single, long take that pans and tilts from card to card before coming to rest on a long scrap of frayed cloth that flaps in the breeze. Following this image of futile but mesmerizing movement imperfectly secured to a material structure overrun by the life process, we see a brief traveling shot taken from the inside of a car driving through a tunnel, which cuts to a low-angle, slow-motion shot of a bed sheet on a clothesline that dances in the wind, the sun shining behind and through its porous fabric into the camera. As the sun fills the frame, flaring out the image, the camera pans and tilts down to a shot of the sheet's shadow on the sidewalk, which slowly shifts and sways.

Immediately following these establishing shots, which convey little information about our location (one title card notes the film's setting as "North Beach San Francisco"), but which do fix the film's ethereal tone, the camera cuts to a high-angle, slow-motion shot of a man's dark shadow and feet (those of Mead, though his face is not yet seen) ambling along a bleached-out, luminous sidewalk. A pair of similarly-framed shots of Mead's shuffling legs and shadow follow, then the image cuts to a rapid burst of single-frame footage depicting two anonymous workers loading materials into the back of a pickup truck, which plays in fast-motion. The image then cuts again to Mead drifting

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid 18.

through the city. In a series of brief shots that eventually reveal Mead's face, we find him goofing with small children beside a playground, walking without purpose down the middle of an active street, strolling through a long shot while framed by a circular, black matte reminiscent of those used in silent cinema, and finally, stealing a flower from a sidewalk florist.

After fleeing across the street with flower in hand, Mead is eventually found standing outside an apartment building, looking up at something off screen with a concerned look on his face. A brief cutaway shows two children staring vacantly into the camera, then Mead is again seen looking up at something off screen. Framed from behind, he approaches the building in front of him and the camera tilts up to reveal the object of his gaze: a pair of windows on the building's second floor. We cut to a close-up of Mead's hand on a door handle as it struggles unsuccessfully to open the door. After another cutaway to the same two children, we cut to a high-angle shot of Mead on the sidewalk staring dumbly at the camera, which now shoots him from the position of the second-story window that previously drew his gaze. After a beat, Mead turns and walks up the sidewalk out of frame as a second exposure bleeds through the image – a shot of what appears to be a stuffed monkey hanging from a wire in an otherwise unpopulated living room. Presumably, this is the domestic interior Mead failed to access.

In this deceptively haphazard sequence, which runs approximately five and a half minutes, frequent cutaways to seemingly extraneous documentary footage of neighborhood scenery serve to interrupt or retard *The Flower Thief's* rather occasional narrative, diverting our attention from the protagonist Rice once described as an unnamed “poet living in North Beach, San Francisco,” whose life this film presumably takes as its

center.⁴⁸⁶ Yet this sequence nevertheless establishes, in a relatively systematic fashion, the double absence of shelter and belonging that constitutes what I refer to in the previous chapter as “postwar homelessness” as the point of departure of this film’s narrative. In addition to constructing a sequence where Mead discovers he is locked out of his apartment, a plot point which is communicated through a conventional employment of eyeline matches and a detail-oriented close-up, Rice also utilizes a series of representational strategies to convey Mead’s detachment from mainstream society. The criminal act that gives *The Flower Thief* its title expresses this detachment rather explicitly. But throughout this sequence, Mead is depicted as someone deeply out of sync with his surroundings, reflecting David E. James’s characterization of the poet as a superfluous cultural practitioner who remains “economically unincorporated” and socially unplaced within the context of modernity because of poetry’s stubborn “resistan[ce] to integration into the mercantile processes of capitalism or its attendant social rituals.”⁴⁸⁷

Mead’s superfluous character is suggested, for instance, by the metonymic association that links his aimless drifting to the rag and bed sheet seen in the film’s opening shots. The transience and contingency signified by these flapping materials slides metonymically across the splices that join the shots in this sequence, accumulating in Mead’s shadow and body, and inflecting our reading of his leisurely mannerisms. Meandering through the North Beach streets as if carried by the wind, Mead lacks the purpose and direction of those who inhabit the working world that envelopes him. He is aligned more closely with the children he encounters along the way, as many

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid 4.

⁴⁸⁷ James 32, 31.

commentators have noted. But his difference from mainstream society is underscored by Rice's alternation between slow- and fast-motion photography, which further contrasts Mead's casual movements with the sped-up temporality attaining in normative spheres of labor and commerce. This temporal disjunction is also heightened by Rice's use of a visual device associated with silent cinema (the circular matte), which makes Mead appear like some unwelcome holdover from a bygone era. But Rice's framing throughout this sequence enhances Mead's alterity. The first five shots that feature Mead depict him as an anonymous, immaterial shadow whose opacity is juxtaposed against the brilliant, sun-drenched concrete that structures his urban environment. Emerging into partial visibility and then melding with the shadows cast by nearby buildings and trees, Mead troubles the logic of appearance that governs the surrounding, common world. He is represented not only as a futile presence in this landscape, but also as a decidedly turbid one – an unsettling darkness floating through an otherwise transparent public sphere.

Lacking a stable dwelling or a sense of social recognition, Mead's character thus occupies a similarly homeless position as that of the NAC's other derelict protagonists. Appearing more like the joyful tramps in *Pull My Daisy* than the listless mopes in *Guns of the Trees*, he does not exactly suffer this position: he is happy to be free from the bustle of society, and becomes accustomed rather quickly to his unanticipated vagrancy, using the latter as an excuse to hunt through back alleys for more illicit flowers. But unlike the poets in *Pull My Daisy*, *The Flower Thief*'s protagonist is not content with such fleeting kicks. Rather than submitting wholeheartedly to the lure of street life, whose unpredictability *Pull My Daisy* extols, Mead spends the remainder of the film

moving along the margins of San Francisco in pursuit of an environment conducive to both habitation and contingency.

This search leads Mead to a variety of subcultural, abandoned, and peripheral locations, which provide a welcome relief from the accelerated pace and mechanized environs of dominant culture. Heading first to the North Beach's famous Beat hangout, the Co-Existence Bagel Shop, Mead makes the scene with an assortment of hipsters (which include the poet Bob Kaufman), immersing himself in the vibrant atmosphere of this crowded, bohemian venue and even contributing – if lethargically – to that atmosphere's production. Amidst animated conversations, raucous poetry readings (included on the sound track, but not pictured), and a jazz performance, Mead is found gently bopping his head or patting a bongo drum to the beat that pervades the bar. After that scene fizzles, he takes to exploring a massive, abandoned powerhouse left to deteriorate in an overlooked interstice of the city. In an extended sequence, this crumbling structure is reanimated through the anarchic improvisations of a rotating cast of local artists and scenesters (including Kaufman and Eric Nord) with whom Mead cavorts, goes mad, and plays house amidst the ruins. But when the powerhouse is reduced to rubble, Mead makes his way (via a brief stopover in jail) to a fairground at San Francisco's western edge: the former Playland amusement park (aka Playland-at-the-Beach). In this space of purposeless expenditure, which here appears mostly empty, as if pictured at mid-morning on a weekday, Mead tries his hand at some tic-tac-toe, cruises a young rake in a leather jacket, takes a ride on a merry-go-round, and engages in some explosive sex on the beach. After the fireworks subside, he meanders along the coast and disappears into the sea.

Though geographically distant and distinct in numerous ways (culturally, architecturally, tonally, financially, etc.), these three main locations are similar in crucial respects. In each of these marginal or forgotten spaces, a general atmosphere of purposelessness allows intimacy to rise up in waves, slowly emerging into experience with “*the fullness... of an invading flood.*”⁴⁸⁸ These settings afford their inhabitants the sort of “lounge time” required to cultivate alternative forms of private and public experience, offering a relatively enclosed, non-synchronous realm sheltered from the standardized temporality of dominant culture, in which the mechanizing effects of late modernity can be shrugged off or counteracted through vitalizing practices of intimate exchange.⁴⁸⁹

The cessation of purpose attaining in these spaces resonates in important ways with Georges Bataille’s understanding of inner experience as a communicative potential arising from the abolition of “project,” where the refusal of action-oriented, utilitarian modes of existence facilitates radical states of intimate communion.⁴⁹⁰ Though far more whimsical than the anguished ecstasies envisioned by Bataille, the intimate exchanges that occur in these realms are characterized by a similar instability and fluidity as Bataille’s inner experience. Like the dynamic version of intimacy Rice cultivated on the Acapulco seaside, where the wild movements of his “inner spring of creation” came to

⁴⁸⁸ Bataille, Inner Experience 17, italics in original.

⁴⁸⁹ Vivian Sobchack, “Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir,” Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory, ed. Jon Lewis (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998). Rice’s interest in slowness and purposelessness can also be seen in his frequent statements against the increasing speed or temporality of daily life in late-modern society. See, for instance: Rice, “Diaries” esp. 114-115. Rice also touches on this theme in an article published in a magazine called *Show Business*, in which Rice describes his plans for an unrealized film called “The Spider’s Trail,” which concerned: “Man’s accelerated and intensified consciousness, to which we all bear witness” (“The Spider’s Trail,” New Feature Film, To Be Shot in N.Y. This Summer By Ron Rice,” n.a., Show Business 7 July 1962, n.p. Included in Reginald Gay Collection.)

⁴⁹⁰ Bataille 22.

mimic the unpredictable surging of the surrounding coastline, these purposeless sites provide the setting in which a distinctly turbulent experiential atmosphere can emerge, one where boundaries between self and other, inside and outside dissolve into an “ocean[ic]” coursing.⁴⁹¹

The Bagel Shop scene illustrates this atmosphere particularly well. It occurs shortly after the film’s opening sequence in which Mead finds that he is locked out of his apartment. In a brief series of shots, we follow Mead as he hustles through the North Beach streets, jogging sloppily past teenagers holding schoolbooks and automobiles in transit, as if seeking some escape from this terrorizing culture of productiveness. He arrives at a dimly lit corner bar where hiply-dressed men and women of different ages and races lounge around in a crowded but relaxed space, perching on bar stools or sitting at tables while smoking, drinking, and conversing. Though bands of light cut into this space through large windows at the front of the bar that partially illuminate the smoke-filled room, the interior is nevertheless dark and indeterminate, its inhabitants largely anonymous silhouettes, a combination of outline and texture. After a few shots of the space, we see a close-up of Mead’s head in profile, lit from behind and appearing as a dark field. A second exposure comes into the frame: a shot of the Bagel Shop’s exterior sign. We are thus placed in what Rice once described as “the famous ‘Bagel Shop’... [which] was the leading institution of culture and life on the West Coast of America in the late fifties.”⁴⁹²

Following this establishing sequence, we see quick glimpses of occurrences within and around the bar: Mead plays with a baby, placing a flower petal on its

⁴⁹¹ Rice, letter to Robert Frank; Bataille 27, see also 92-98.

⁴⁹² Batten 35.

forehead; a man in a beret strolls down the street toward the bar as another man in a baggy suit and dark sunglasses exits the front door, the two exchanging pleasantries as they pass; a person off screen pours beer from a glass into that of a man with a broad mustache, then clinks the two glasses together as Mead looks on; a woman with a long, loose ponytail hanging over one shoulder speaks animatedly, gesticulating with her hands as another woman smiles and nods in recognition; a man with a narrow-rimmed hat and a patterned vest (the poet Bob Kaufman) holds a beer and talks casually with another man at his side who wears a checked suit and a thin mustache; a woman and a man sit beside each other looking off screen, then turn their heads to the left in synchrony. The images in this sequence portray a space that is not only cool and convivial, but also brimming with relationality. The Bagel Shop appears as a highly fluid social venue, in which forms of association stream across artificial boundaries of age, race, and gender, creating a vitalizing atmosphere of rapport. Yet the people within this space also radiate hipness, performing a subcultural style that delimits the boundaries of this space, its terms of entrance and participation. Importantly, as the scene progresses, we see a small group of musicians at one edge of the room playing instruments (a trumpet and an upright bass are visible) as a jazz song plays on the soundtrack. And throughout the scene we see various shots of people nodding their heads or moving rhythmically to the beat in the room. Individuals marked by their difference from dominant culture through clothing, appearance, gestures, and mannerisms assemble in this space to mingle, assume poses, and respond in an embodied manner to the improvised modes of creative expression occurring around them, engaging in the production of a stimulating realm of interaction and appearance that is actively differentiated from the surrounding world.

Rice's camera participates in this activity. Throughout the Bagel Shop scene, he shoots from standing and seated positions, relying on tight framings that result from his proximity to his subjects, and which – when filming with the aid of the natural light that punctuates the bar – yield images that are rich in detail, highlighting the particularity of the individuals he films. He also employs shaky, handheld cinematography to respond to the quick movements of those around him, which heightens the sense of contingency and unpredictability conveyed by those movements. The soundtrack enhances the feelings of spontaneity and irrationality, presenting a collage of absurd sonic experiments (such as recorded speech being played in reverse) and amateur recordings of poetry readings, blues guitar, and an up-tempo jazz song that are punctuated by missed notes, accidental dissonances, feedback, and background noise. A sort of intimate cacophony seems to animate this space, one resembling the sea of communication described by Bataille, in which a multiplicity of “Waves, undulations, single particles” stream in and out of each other with a measured agitation but only achieve “a fleeting unity.”⁴⁹³

This sense of fleeting unity emerges in the middle of this scene, when Rice's method of editing shifts in a subtle but significant way. What begins as a mere documentation of subcultural relations transforms, almost imperceptibly, into an active analysis and reproduction of the medium of those relations through montage. As if the associative bonds in the profilmic swelled and spilled into the level of form, Rice suddenly fuses together an extended chain of images in which prominent details and gestures marking the individuals featured in each shot carry over into the next, where they reverberate with the appearance or actions of other people existing in close proximity. The resonances between images generate a sense of closeness and

⁴⁹³ Bataille 93.

connectivity between the Bagel Shop patrons that Rice enhances through the use of strategic framings, eyeline matches, and shot/reverse-shot relations typically associated with narrative cinema. In a consistent, though somewhat unconventional manner, he weaves discrete views of actions and occurrences into an interlacing fabric that enfolds a relatively coherent cinematic space, one whose arrangement is not clearly established in advance but unfurled over the course of the sequence as the distribution of bodies and objects featured in each shot assembles itself into a recognizable form. Following Rice's own assertion that the "careful understanding of a films [sic] internal structure is worth some words," it will help to analyze this sequence in detail.⁴⁹⁴

As a dark, surreal poem plays on the soundtrack, the aforementioned shot of a man and woman turning their heads in synchrony cuts to a close-up of a man's hand reaching down from screen right to pull a cigarette from an offered pack, which is positioned at the bottom left of the screen. As the man pulls the cigarette back to where he's standing, the camera follows his hand, panning to the right and tilting up to frame him in a low-angle medium shot. The man raises and lowers his hand mechanically to pack the tobacco into his cigarette, moving to the right edge of the frame while acknowledging the person who provided the smoke, who sits below and in front of him, off screen to the left. The image then cuts to a high-angle shot of a man seated on the left side of the screen, as if presenting a reverse shot taken from the standing man's perspective. This seated man pulls a cigarette from a pack with a similarly mechanical gesture, quickly raising it and lowering it while looking off screen to the right. Following his glance, we cut to a brief close-up of a young woman with pale skin and long dark hair seated at screen right, who appears to be speaking while looking off screen to the left. We

⁴⁹⁴ Rice, "A Statement" op. cit.

then cut to the object of her view: a medium close-up of a similar-looking young woman with pale skin and long dark hair, who sits at the left of the screen while looking to the right. She fidgets with her hair and listens, nodding her head in recognition. The image cuts to a medium close-up of a man seated in virtually the same position of the frame, who nods his head in the same manner while looking off screen in the same direction, his arm resting on the frame of a jukebox. A cut follows his eyeline to return us to the first pale-skinned woman, now seen to be sitting at the opposite side of the jukebox, a hand fidgeting with her hair in the manner of the second pale-skinned woman. As the sound switches to a recording of improvised drumming accompanied by scat and incomprehensible noises, we cut back to the second pale-skinned woman, whose head is turned away from the camera, her dark curls nearly filling the frame. As she leans forward, bringing an unlit cigarette to her lips, the camera pans right to reveal the head-nodding man (originally seen two shots before) seated directly beside her. He lights her cigarette with a match as an unlit cigarette dangles from his lips. A cut takes us to a shot of people seated at a table. A man with a cigarette in his hand stands up as a cloud of smoke enters the frame from off screen. We then see a man beside the jukebox rolling his head rhythmically from side to side with a cigarette in his mouth. A quick shot of another man smiling then cuts to a shot of the first pale-skinned woman leaning her head back in laughter.

This, I submit, is what a non-world looks like. In this chain of images, which flashes across the screen in approximately half a minute, a sense of commonality is conveyed through the construction of a complex system of intimate exchange, where a reverberating play of glances, gestures, and inarticulate sounds produces a relational

space mediated by the “language of the soul.”⁴⁹⁵ Linked through a sort of “mimetic-sympathetic” circuit, the beatniks in this scene suddenly overcome their shared condition of alienation in a flurry of “fellow-feeling,” or a fleeting configuration of sameness-in-difference generated through the public circulation of private expressions.⁴⁹⁶ An atmosphere of belonging is generated, one resembling what Park would refer to as a “moral climate.” The Bagel Shop shelters a murky, stimulating environment in which the impulses of inner experience, normally sublimated in social spheres, gain “full and free expression,” facilitating the creation of a paradoxical space of appearance and recognition that is simultaneously opaque and illuminating, fluid and objective, vital and artificial.⁴⁹⁷

Yet this atmosphere is not rooted to a particular region or place. Like the “mobile sites of drag, youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting, and cruising” discussed by Berlant and Warner, the particular form of “counterintimacy” that flashes up in the Bagel Shop is elaborated through fugitive and ephemeral relational practices that often migrate to new venues without warning and cannot reliably be found operating anywhere.⁴⁹⁸ As Kaufman notes in his poetic tribute to the North Beach hangout, “Bagel Shop Jazz,” this venue does not house, but temporarily hosts a transient manifestation of “Shadow people, projected on coffee-shop walls/... eating each other/ Over a noisy cup of coffee,” who remain mere “Brief, beautiful shadows, burned on walls of night.”⁴⁹⁹ Echoing the fleeting, ethereal imagery of Kaufman’s invocation, the sense of unity conveyed by Rice’s montage dissipates as swiftly as it emerges, returning to more general

⁴⁹⁵ Arendt, *Life of the Mind* 33.

⁴⁹⁶ I draw these terms from Justus Nieland’s discussion of the “mimetic-sympathetic public sphere” in *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2008) 23.

⁴⁹⁷ Park 41.

⁴⁹⁸ Berlant and Warner 561.

⁴⁹⁹ Bob Kaufman, “Bagel Shop Jazz” in *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 14, 15.

documentary views of bopping heads and bodies in motion before abruptly transitioning to the next scene. After a brief shot of a man sweeping cigarettes from the otherwise empty Bagel Shop floor, we see a close-up of a hand reaching for a torn newspaper headline reading: “VIOLENCE.” We then cut to a shot of Mead breaking through a window of the abandoned powerhouse with a two-by-four, a maniacal grin on his face. We have suddenly, violently been uprooted and transplanted to the next stop on our itinerary.

Bataille’s understanding of the complex status of “project” in inner experience provides a helpful framework through which to unravel the dialectic of worldliness and vitality attaining in the Bagel Shop scene, which can also provide insight into the abruptness with which this scene ends. For Bataille, the term “project” is affiliated not only with rational, purposive activities directed toward specific ends but also with the cultural, epistemological, and linguistic structures that delimit such activities. Project is thus comparable to Arendt’s conception of worldliness in important respects, rooted as the latter is in the stabilizing work of both fabrication and convention. And though Bataille positions inner experience against project in a manner that is consistent with Arendt’s insistence on intimacy’s opposition to worldliness, Bataille also holds that inner experience is not simply devoid of project or purpose. Inner experience revolves, instead, around a sort of purposeless purposiveness: its principle, he asserts, is “to emerge through project from the realm of project.”⁵⁰⁰ Inner experience thus entails a certain direction, though it is directed toward the evasion of direction. It “leads to no harbor,” Bataille

⁵⁰⁰ Bataille 46.

states, “but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense.”⁵⁰¹ Its project is to go beyond project.

For Bataille, this process of going beyond is not reducible to a destructive or negative movement. In a passage of *Inner Experience*, he makes this point explicitly, attributing a distinctly poetic potential to experience. “Reason alone has the power to undo [the] work [of inner experience],” he insists, “to hurl down what it has built up.”⁵⁰² This passage would seem contradictory within the logic of Bataille’s system, where work and accumulation are both associated with reason, thus making reason a productive force rather than a power of destruction as it is here envisioned. Yet this formulation becomes comprehensible when we understand inner experience as a work whose yield is what Bataille refers to as “non-knowledge.” Inner experience is not a simple negation of project, production, or poesis. It is an active “putting into question... of that which a man knows of being,” one whose product is “the *unknown*” itself, “a presence that is no longer in any way distinct from an absence.”⁵⁰³ It is this place of non-presence that Julia Kristeva has designated “the intimate” as such, a timeless interior region of return and revolt, which is “where we end up when we question apparent meanings and values.”⁵⁰⁴

The intimate activities conducted in the Bagel Shop do depend on a leisurely atmosphere of uselessness in order to emerge at all. But these activities are not devoid of worldliness, as Arendt would have us believe. Like the “nonstandard intimacies” that drive the queer “world-making project[s]” envisioned by Berlant and Warner, the intimate activities we witness in *The Flower Thief* are directed toward a specific end:

⁵⁰¹ Ibid 3.

⁵⁰² Ibid 46.

⁵⁰³ Ibid 4, 5.

⁵⁰⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University, 2002) 43.

namely, the production of new experiences of inwardness and belonging, through which Rice hoped to forge the basis of an alternative world.⁵⁰⁵ Yet these experiences are only valuable to the extent that they “put into question” established configurations of worldliness, allowing those involved in their production to shrug off the normative values and reifying effects of dominant culture, affording them a sense of accessing a wild, inner region modeled after “life itself.” The intimacy that we see at work in *The Flower Thief* must avoid stabilizing into an ordered or reasonable construct if it is to remain intimate at all. It is “nonstandard” in the sense of being averse to standardization, habits, and conventions; the world that it “builds up” is defined by its non-worldliness.

This complex dynamic accounts for the disorienting relay between vitality and worldliness that we witness in the Bagel Shop scene. Just as the homelessness suffered under late modernity appears to have been alleviated through intimacy, or through vitalizing interactions that subvert alienating conventions and provide a consoling sense of habitation, this sensation is necessarily thwarted by intimacy’s own resistance to habituation, or its tendency to subvert all forms of convention and stability. A feeling of home may be attained, but it is fleeting and precarious. It emerges in the midst of intimate exchanges that cannot persist as durable achievements without relinquishing their intimacy.

To put this problem somewhat differently, the recovery of home is here presented as an effort to inhabit a realm of pure vitality. Though this project is of course self-defeating, it is also strangely realizable to an extent. A feeling of life is manufactured in this scene both at the level of the profilmic and that of film form. Yet the fabrication of life here depends on a whole repertoire of subcultural conventions that necessarily call

⁵⁰⁵ Berlant and Warner 558.

vitality into question. In the Bagel Shop itself, these conventions take shape variously as hip styles and dispositions affected by individual patrons; the presence of bohemian accoutrements such as beer, cigarettes, berets, and bongo drums; the requisite jazz ensemble and druggy poetry; and a basic adherence to an ideology of spontaneity whose elaboration can be traced back further than the postwar “culture of spontaneity,” at least as far as the historical avant-garde. The formal operations of the film mirror this ideology, employing a highly ordered aesthetic that draws from a range of cinematic conventions affiliated with realist and avant-garde traditions in order to approximate, in Rice’s terms, “the fibre of life.”⁵⁰⁶ It presents documentary footage of a dynamic subcultural scene that has been recorded in an improvised, participatory style to yield markers of contingency and immediacy, and organizes this footage via a casual appropriation of continuity editing techniques in an effort to express an abstract concept (community, belonging).

The presence of these conventions in both content and form points to the worldliness in vitality, indexing the static cultural frameworks required for dynamic experiences of life to accrue. Yet in order for these conventions to function effectively, they must necessarily be disavowed as conventions. Through the avant-garde’s particular brand of “ex-nominating operation,” the lessons inherited by the Beats from Dada are naturalized through recourse to what Paul Arthur identifies as the “elaborated myth of ‘presentness’” that defines American avant-garde film of the ’60s.⁵⁰⁷ In other words, the habit of vitality adopted by the Bagel Shop’s patrons, much like Rice’s formless form

⁵⁰⁶ Rice, “Ode to the Eye” op. cit.

⁵⁰⁷ Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2005) 1. I borrow the phrase “ex-nominating operation” from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 138, italics removed.

itself, must be denied as a habit to yield a feeling of detachment from worldliness, or of participating in something that is “living and real.”⁵⁰⁸ This disavowal may afford a sort of refuge from reification or routine. The Reverend Al Carmines touches on this point in his remarkable sermon on Rice’s film, “Saint Francis and The Flower Thief,” in which he explains that the Beats’ tendency toward a “religious abandonment to the minute” reflects their “attempt to strip off the layers of accumulated impersonality – brittle cultivation that winds itself around us as mindlessly and unconsciously as a shell around a snail.”⁵⁰⁹ But as the Reverend’s imagery here suggests, without the structure of habit, or the stabilizing accumulation of convention and routine, no lasting form of habitation can be secured. The effort to remedy homelessness through intimacy must therefore end by reinstating homelessness.

This dilemma plays itself out over the remainder of *The Flower Thief*, whose episodic structure follows from Mead’s inevitable displacement from the increasingly precarious locales he strives to inhabit. Once deposited at the powerhouse, the film’s domestic ambitions are made manifest with a new clarity and urgency. We watch as Mead and a pair of friends (a stray cat and an oversized teddy bear) work to ensconce themselves in the vast, maze-like interior of this seemingly vacant structure, which according to Rice once functioned “as a bus [or] trolley repair station.”⁵¹⁰ Mead gives the bear a bath and is later found setting out a candlelight dinner for the cat, approximating rituals of heteronormative intimacy (bathing the kids, feeding the pets) that can only appear perverse when enacted in this setting with these actors. His efforts at domestication are also repeatedly interrupted by the irrational outbursts of a cadre of

⁵⁰⁸ Rice, “Ode to the Eye” op. cit.

⁵⁰⁹ Carmines 124.

⁵¹⁰ Batten 34.

scary beatniks who suddenly burst forth from a back room or file creepily out of an underground tunnel. Transforming Mead's playhouse into a combination insane asylum/performance art space, these mad "junkie prophets" disrupt and divert Mead's homemaking practices by enacting vaguely political protests that return us to the alienating context of late-modern American society.

The uncanny intrusion of domesticity within these junk-ridden ruins of public transport recurs in a later sequence involving an attractive young bohemian couple (seen earlier in the Bagel Shop) who also appear to be inhabiting the powerhouse. In the midst of a scene depicting the couple and some friends engaging in meaningless activities in a large, open concourse, we suddenly cut to a three-shot sequence in which the couple is seen embracing in the dark, showering together, and then cuddling before a sun-filled window with lace curtains, playing husband and wife in some idyllic, domestic interior. Returning to the powerhouse, we watch as the husband, who apparently has transformed into an automaton, opens the door to a metal locker to reveal the wife necking with another man. The mechanical husband then moves on to the next locker where he finds Mead inside, making love to the stuffed bear. The seemingly extraneous scenes of heteronormative domesticity that immediately precede these images are defamiliarized in a series of "unsettling images" similar to those which Bataille associates with poetry, a perverse yet moving employment of language that "overturns everything within us like a violent wind," "touch[ing] us" at a deeply emotional level by "introduc[ing] the

strange... by means of the familiar [so that] the familiar [dissolves] into the strange, and ourselves with it.”⁵¹¹

In such sequences, it is as if the trappings of domesticity from which *The Flower Thief*'s subjects have been estranged cannot be regained for fear of their becoming too familiar. In a movement that echoes the simultaneous adoption and disavowal of subcultural conventions that we witness in the Bagel Shop, these sequences find *The Flower Thief* reaching for a home that it cannot allow itself to occupy. Because it cannot conceive of settlement in terms other than the staunching of vitality, it can only approach worldliness anxiously, through parodic rehearsals of worldly stability in a decaying space overrun by the life process. The concluding sequence shot in this location expresses this problem acutely. We find Mead seated atop a heap of rubble with his abusive girlfriend, who is dressed inexplicably in a bathing suit. On a makeshift tabletop, the two manically shuffle discarded food containers, milk cartons, and paper cups as a young boy gawks at them from the sidelines. On the soundtrack, a psychiatrist speaking at a state hospital reads a passage from *Alice in Wonderland*, remarks on madness and LSD, then reminds us that “we’re all part of a sick society, troubled members of a troubled world.” In this absurd parody of the family dinner, an image of home is built up but in a bewildering, nonsensical form. Domesticity can only be invoked to be overturned, leaving only scattered debris to subsist.

When the powerhouse becomes too weird, or too normal, Mead heads back out into the streets of North Beach. He stops off once more at the Bagel Shop, but it’s no longer a scene, just a lonesome bar; he rolls down hills in a wagon with the teddy bear; he

⁵¹¹ Bataille 5. The shower sequence was apparently significant enough to Rice to warrant his use of an artificial light when shooting it, which he claims was the only time he employed artificial lighting during *The Flower Thief*'s production. See Batten 33.

squats for a stretch in Washington Square Park, but is arrested and executed for urinating in public; he rises again but gets tired and falls asleep, this time on an outdoor statue of a lion, his hand cupping its ass; then he finds his way to Playland where he frolics and gets laid. In the final shot of the film, which is actually two shots, Mead simply vanishes: a double exposure combines a shot of Mead walking eerily like a phantom down a wall along the seashore with a shot of waves splashing and swirling around some rocks. The exposure of the waves remains on screen for a few seconds longer than that of Mead. When the image finally cuts to black, the soundtrack, which plays the foreboding opening of the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky's "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle," continues to linger for another twenty seconds.

The dematerialization of Rice's homeless protagonist in this concluding sequence is inevitable. With no way of conceiving resolution, how else could the film end? Rice's suspicion of stasis required that his conclusion be inconclusive, a point that is underscored in an outline of *The Flower Thief* published along with his interview in *Film Comment*. Offering the reader multiple options for interpreting this scene, Rice describes his final location as: "The sea, where: (a) Taylor just plain disappears into. (b) Taylor commits suicide. (c) The poet disappears into eternity. (d) Taylor decides to take a bath"⁵¹² Like the unsettled locales featured throughout *The Flower Thief*, Rice's ending had to remain open. And his resistance to fixity went further than the film's non-conclusion, extending down even to its material base. Along with producing multiple cuts of this work (of which at least 5 appear to have existed), Rice also reportedly expressed

⁵¹² Batten 35, spacing modified.

his intentions to either dye the film blue or simply burn it in defiance of Hollywood.⁵¹³

While such plans reflect then-emergent concerns in American avant-garde cinema with destabilizing the filmic “work” by amplifying the elements of liveness and chance inherent in cinematic exhibition, these plans also clearly express Rice’s deep ambivalence about reification, stability, and worldliness. Rice did and did not want *The Flower Thief* to persist as a material thing in the same way that he did and did not want to finally locate a stable home-space. If *The Flower Thief* does remain today as a relic of Rice’s pursuit of home, this is only due to cinema’s inherent disturbance of the artwork’s status as a dead object, or its uncanny capacity to combine life and death into an absurd form.

Coda: Celestial Hobo

Four minutes into Ron Rice’s follow-up to *The Flower Thief*, the experimental short *Senseless*, an unsettling series of images comes to pass. A bearded man in a hooded robe is found kneeling in prayer before a profane assemblage of wooden beams, metal, and an animal skull. In dramatic, high contrast black and white footage set to a sometimes whimsical, sometimes ominous orchestral score, we see the man walking on a beach beneath a web of old rope and tattered canvas, seemingly strung up by previous inhabitants to serve as a makeshift shelter, its knotted ropes and shredded fabric now billowing in the wind. With a portion of an animal skeleton hoisted onto his shoulder, this lone settler of some vanished community walks slowly to a refrigerator left abandoned in the middle of the beach, opens the door, bends forward, drops the skeleton inside, and closes the door.

⁵¹³ On Rice’s intentions to dye or burn the film, see: Sargeant 83; Mead, letter to Ron Rice, 16 June 1960, Reginald Gay Collection; and Michael Goodwin, “Excerpts from an interview with Taylor Mead and Shirley Clarke / January 1983,” January 1983, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley.

We cut to a close-up of an old, ruined speedometer, then tilt and pan past a stretch of ocean to find the man now dragging a car tire through the sand. Cut to a close-up of a pair of hands abstracted from their surroundings, stitching a small piece of domestic kitsch: a tapestry featuring an idyllic landscape (a cabin, a river, pine trees, a pillowy cloud) with big letters that read: “GOD BLESS OUR HOME.” Cut to another close-up of a pot of boiling water, with a baby bottle inside that bobs and spins in the heat. Cut to an extreme long shot of the exterior of a banal one-story building resembling a ranch house. A pair of shadows cast by small awnings cut violently across the building’s façade at 45 degree angles, invoking some impending danger. Two young men in dark clothing walk toward the door, starkly set off against the white of the building and carrying a gas mask and an American flag. On the roof, a sign designates this an office of “CIVIL DEFENSE.” On either edge of the sign stand a pair of Coca-Cola logos.

Coming in the midst of Rice’s schizophrenic travelogue, which moves jarringly between images of a road trip, protests against nuclear war, pot smoking, bull fights, landscapes ruined by industry, and scenes of beatnik antics shot in San Francisco, Venice, and different areas of Mexico, this sequence cannot be reduced to any singular or final interpretation. In its stubborn resistance to clean reason or rationalization, it reveals the film’s title, *Senseless*, to designate an active refusal of coherence as much as an unhealthy mental state imposed on the late-modern subject by the insanity of the period. Indeed, this “montage of events that have no rational linkage” would seem to verify Rice’s description of himself as “a recording machine... [for] nonsense.”⁵¹⁴ Yet despite its absurdity, this montage is not devoid of meaning. When read in relation to Rice’s biography, creative practice, and this film’s broader historical context, the domestic

⁵¹⁴ Batten 32.

imagery in this sequence takes shape as a constellation of anxieties about the breakdown of traditional home-spaces in late-modern American society, and the limitations of the avant-garde's attempts to rectify its homeless condition through a lifestyle and aesthetic of immediacy.

These anxieties register most immediately in this sequence's clear criticism of the domestic dream holding sway in the U.S. at the time of the film's production. In its parodic re-staging of a banal domestic chore (stocking the fridge) within such a bleak and soulless landscape, and its juxtaposition of the dilapidated, canvas "shelter" adopted by its momentary protagonist with the picturesque imagination of home glimpsed in the kitschy tapestry, the sequence unsettles then-dominant conceptions of the private household as an autonomous space of refuge, vitality, and personal fulfillment, while also suggesting the vacuity underlying postwar ideals of affluence and material abundance. Coming just over a minute after documentary footage of a sit-in protest against nuclear armament at the United States Atomic Energy Commission in San Francisco, which features a brief close-up of a boldly-printed sign designating "HELL ON EARTH" to be the consequence of modern warfare, the hellish, post-apocalyptic atmosphere of this beach scene also reveals the absurdity underlying then-contemporary investments in the private sphere as a safe haven from nuclear fallout. And in its final image of the Office of Civil Defense and Coca-Cola, one can even read a gesture toward the postwar era's uncomfortably cozy imbrication of middle-class domesticity, consumer capitalism, and national security. Though Rice's decision to depart from San Francisco for Venice and Mexico was motivated, in part, by his dissatisfaction with the dwindling Beat scene in North Beach, the hostility *Senseless* exhibits toward normative domestic and social

spaces of the postwar period reveal that he had no interest in abandoning his vagrant lifestyle for a more traditional, settled existence.

But this sequence does not simply extol homelessness. The sacred, idyllic image of refuge invoked in the kitschy tapestry is not merely ridiculed. In many ways, this image condenses Rice's nostalgic sentiments about privacy – his longing for an autonomous shelter set apart from the world and conducive to intimacy. And despite the parodic elements in the beach scenes, *Senseless* is far less irreverent about the absence of home than *The Flower Thief*. Against the latter's carefree meandering, *Senseless* frames the homelessness of the late-modern subject in a tenor of grim seriousness, presenting the vulnerability and alienation of the age as resulting from a disorienting "loss" of home. It is telling in this regard that Rice's initial conception of the project into which *Senseless* eventually developed – a film he began working on after he completed *The Flower Thief*, and which he was hoping to produce in San Francisco and Venice alone – was structured around a married couple whose attempt to inhabit the traditional form of the nuclear family is thwarted by modernity. Outlining a tentative plot for the project in a note dated October 1961, which I quote here in its original spelling and punctuation, Rice writes:

Jim as the wanderer meets Caroline, falls in love, marries her. they have a child, who dies. How? sickness, violence, fallout, ? because of this they... They embark upon the 'black Journey' on the endless river beneath a thousand bridges while a million pumping twisting oil wells work. [...] In the mist of all this early hell [...] a doctor of the mind [...] gives Jim and Caroline magic medicine, they leave the black river, enter a nice doll house in the beautiful country and live happily every after.⁵¹⁵

Whether or not Rice's sketch of this storybook ending was sincere, his conception of this early project as a sort of magical domestic melodrama centered on the destruction and

⁵¹⁵ Rice, "Concerning the film which I am shooting in San Francisco and Venice," October 1961, Reginald Gay Collection.

eventual recovery of home is reflected in the somberness with which *Senseless* confronts postwar homelessness. Indeed, it is interesting to note that a later description of *Senseless* composed by Rice after his completion of the film still framed it as a story of “A man and his wife [who] start a voyage in a boat,” though his description of the ending is far less promising: “Under a full moon the couple walk the horizon to disappear beneath the world.”⁵¹⁶

As in Vivian Sobchack’s reading of classical film noir, the sequence of domestic imagery described above reveals *Senseless* to be an outgrowth of a “transitional moment” in American culture, when past iterations of private shelter and public belonging had been rendered inaccessible (or undesirable), but no viable alternative to these forms had been realized or discovered. Yet Rice’s anxiety about living in the context of this transition was not solely the result of his “inability to imagine being at home in history, in capitalist democracy, *at this time*.”⁵¹⁷ Unlike noir’s protagonists, Rice was not resigned to his homelessness. As we have seen, his films were products of his attempts to rectify this condition, where the solution he proposed did not depend on “constitut[ing] the [late-modern] ‘world on a new basis...,’ ” but on elaborating a whole other world in a more intimate form – a non-world in which the “domestic future” that evaded classical noir could be concretized in a paradoxical solidification of presentness. The existence of this poetic orientation is the very measure of Rice’s radicality: it reveals the progressive purposes to which the NAC’s “retrograde” romantic inclinations were directed, demonstrating their commitment to remedying late-modern alienation through an

⁵¹⁶ Rice, “A short sketch of my past films,” n.d., Reginald Gay Collection.

⁵¹⁷ Sobchack 166.

engaged, alternative cultural practice.⁵¹⁸ However, the limitations of this practice are also evident in this sequence of domestic images, whose evocation of the rootless and superfluous condition of late-modern life results not only from the inhospitable environs of American culture, but also from the impracticality of the avant-garde's ideology of spontaneity.

An anecdote related by P. Adams Sitney in the program notes for a 1968 screening of *Senseless* speaks to this impracticality. According to Sitney, the beach footage with which this sequence begins was actually shot at the site of a failed Utopian community that Eric Nord originally sought to establish on an island off the coast of Mexico. "[A]s the story goes," Sitney writes:

[Nord] purchased an island from the Mexican government with the modest intention of establishing an Utopia. Unfortunately Nord neglected to ascertain whether or not there was running water in his island. There wasn't, of course. So he and his pilgrims established camp of army surplus parachutes for tents on the shores of Baja California. When Rice and his settlers arrived, Nord and his pioneers were gone. Unfurled lonely parachutes rocked with the breezes.⁵¹⁹

Regardless of the authenticity of this anecdote, the image of Rice setting out to settle in such a community resonates strongly with his recurrent quest for some actual, stable, autonomous *elsewhere* in which he could reliably submerge into the opaque eddies of inner experience. That this refuge was not waiting for Rice when he arrived – that its intimate community had already scattered like the tattered fragments of its architecture – is another testament to the ephemerality of the non-world. Though separated geographically and temporally from the settings of *The Flower Thief*, the sea breeze that

⁵¹⁸ Robert Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) 17.

⁵¹⁹ P. Adams Sitney, "Ron Rice: SENSELESS; CHUMLUM," program notes from The Avantgarde Film Tuesday Series at the Jewish Museum, 10 December 1968, Ron Rice File, Paper Materials Collection, Anthology Film Archives, New York.

courses through the lonely parachutes in this sequence is inextricably linked to the turbulent atmosphere of the Bagel Shop, the decaying ruins of the powerhouse, and the perilous shoreline bordering the Playland amusement park.

Despite this particular Utopian failure, *Senseless* does provide glimpses of reparative, life-affirming alternatives to the dreary imagery that Rice foregrounds throughout the film. As in *The Flower Thief*, however, such alternatives always come through fleeting moments of intimate exchange that emerge through improvised forms of play. In *Senseless*, these playful exchanges are made possible by the interstitial spaces and purposeless interludes of travel, as in the celebrated “great train robbery” sequence that occurs approximately twenty minutes into the film. In this scene, a roving band of Dazendadaists discover an abandoned train resting at the edge of a dirt road, its exterior covered in graffiti, and suddenly embark on a playful remake of Edwin S. Porter’s early masterpiece. A man hops a train, a bandit appears, and a skirmish ensues with the engineer while a passenger serenades a woman with a ukulele. Echoing the overgrown rail yard sequence in Mekas’s *Guns of the Trees* (which I discuss in each of my previous chapters), a momentary sense of intimacy and belonging is here produced by way of an extemporaneous performance that seeks to extract some vital impulse from a decaying remnant of modernization. Rice documents this performance with his camera and seeks to transmit its vitality to the viewer through a dynamic form, employing handheld cinematography and recording at a slow frame rate to render the actions in a comic fast-motion. In such scenes, *Senseless* gestures to – and indeed, offers – the sort of animating experiences that Rice repeatedly sought out in Mexico. But this film also reveals that such experiences are neither bound to a specific region nor localizable in a stable

structure. They are dependent on erratic relational practices that flash up unexpectedly and dissipate without warning, and whose invigorating effects are the result of their resistance to structuration.

The “mobile sites” of intimacy that we encounter in *Senseless* further reiterate the lesson conveyed by those sites which punctuate *The Flower Thief*, demonstrating that the alternative world Rice desired was not realizable as a world. As we have seen, this basic contradiction motivates the episodic structure of *The Flower Thief*, generating this film’s dialectic of immediacy and habitation. Yet this contradiction also impelled Rice’s personal movements and practices between 1960-64. The story of Rice’s activities during this period is in fact remarkably similar to that of *The Flower Thief*, revolving as it does around a series of efforts by Rice to forge an alternative home-space in dispersed, subcultural locales throughout the U.S. and Mexico – efforts that were always eventually interrupted or abandoned. In addition to providing an appropriate form for Rice’s rendering of the Beat generation’s “wandering sickness,” the episodic structure of *The Flower Thief* can thus be read as an allegory of the fragility of the intimate worlds Rice struggled to cultivate and maintain from the beginning of 1960 until his death at the end of 1964.⁵²⁰

If the fragility of such environs contributed to the intimacy they offered by facilitating dynamic, unpredictable interactions, this fragility was also the source of considerable frustration for Rice. After his completion of *The Flower Thief*, Rice faced a

⁵²⁰ It is not coincidental, for instance, that many of the locations featured in *The Flower Thief* had been shut down or demolished only two years after Rice completed the film. By the summer of 1962, North Beach was dead: the powerhouse was “torn down,” the Bagel Shop was “forced to close by local pressure,” Washington Square Park was “cleaned up and sprayed,” the “feeling or mood” had dissipated, and the “people who were in the film no longer exist[ed] there” (Batten 34, 35). Even Playland was razed shortly thereafter, when the property was sold to a developer who demolished the park in the fall of 1972 and put up condominiums in its place.

series of disappointments comparable to the implosion of Nord's Utopia and the dwindling of the North Beach scene. These disappointments resulted from a potent confluence of external and internal pressures. On the one hand, the basic lack of resources available to experimental filmmakers in the U.S. and the growing censorship of underground film practices in New York over the course of the '60s made Rice's position as a practicing artist in the States more and more untenable. A letter that Rice wrote in September of 1962 speaks to the incredible difficulties he had in raising funds to support his work, and describes his living conditions in especially bleak terms: writing letters for various grants he was unlikely to receive; relying on friends for food and shelter; lacking the suit (as well as the socks) he would need to interview for jobs; receiving no money from *The Flower Thief*, despite a successful theatrical run that summer; and without funds to retrieve either the negative of *The Flower Thief* or the original reversal print of *Senseless* from the lab.⁵²¹ In the winter of 1964, after Rice had completed *Chumlum* and was still seeking to complete work on *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, Mekas wrote of Rice's departure from New York for Acapulco earlier that year as a forced exile:

He went there [to Mexico], exiled from New York by impossible working and living conditions, without a penny, searching for peace of mind, disgusted with the police persecution of arts in New York. They would not even permit him to hold a benefit screening of his work here, and when he did hold one—at the Gramercy Arts Theatre—they gave him a summons... Rice's *Chumlum* has been acclaimed as a masterpiece in Brussels, in Paris, in Stockholm... But the New York police and city bureaucrats will not permit Rice to show his films! They would rather see him starve to death in Mexico.⁵²²

Alongside such material difficulties and restrictions, however, Rice's failure to complete a number of projects he began conceiving or producing during this period also

⁵²¹ Rice, letter to unknown recipient, 20 September 1962, Reginald Gay Collection.

⁵²² Mekas, *Movie Journal* 161-162.

resulted from his refusal to seek normal forms of employment, his aversion toward all forms of commercial success, his increasing prioritization of narcotics and Mexican getaways over creative practice, and the quarrels he had with friends, family members, and collaborators as a result of such antics. For instance, the aforementioned letter he composed in September of 1962 refers to a falling out he had with his mother, who: “does not give me a cent, since i told her off. the fool still expects me to be working in some gasoline station.”⁵²³ Than November, Rice sent a letter to Joseph E. Levine of Embassy Pictures requesting financial support for “the GREATEST FILM Ever made in New York” before threatening to “direct all the efforts of my ELEBORATE, staff to THE COMPLETE ANILATION OF YOUR ORGANIZATION” if Levine decided to pass.⁵²⁴ More famously, after a benefit screening of an early rough cut of *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* that Rice and Mead arranged at Cooper Union in January of 1963 in order to raise funds to complete the film – a screening for which Mead claims to have cashed in a life insurance policy worth a couple of thousand dollars in order to produce the 70 minute print that the two exhibited – Rice used the proceeds from the screening to purchase tickets to Mexico for he and his girlfriend, where the two remained for several months before returning to New York after they had run out of money.⁵²⁵ According to Mead, this period also witnessed a dramatic change in Rice’s approach to budgeting: “When we started [*The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*], the budget for the film was 90% film, 10% drugs—and then finally it went 70% drugs, 30% film!”⁵²⁶

⁵²³ Rice, letter to unknown recipient.

⁵²⁴ Rice, “Diaries” 123.

⁵²⁵ For Mead’s account of this event, see Sargeant 78-79.

⁵²⁶ Goodwin 2. Mead makes a similar claim, though with different percentages, in Sargeant 84.

Due to the precarity that was both imposed on Rice by an oppressive culture and actively cultivated by him as a sign of authenticity, Rice's efforts to envision a stable, yet vitalizing shelter for interiority grew increasingly desperate between 1963-64. This shift is documented in the journal entries, letters, and artistic statements Rice composed during this period. The non-worldly formations in which Rice had previously imagined intimacy to reside are replaced in these writings by a new emphasis on distinctly otherworldly domains: timeless, astral realms that Rice referred to variously as "cosmic," "celestial," "far-out," "ancient," "eternal," and "Universal."⁵²⁷ If Rice had previously invested redemptive potential in particular, material locales known for housing unruly subcultures, by 1963, he came to locate that potential alternately in "the clouds," "the sky," "Space," the stars," or a realm of "sublimity" residing somewhere on "another planet."⁵²⁸

Rice's 1963 publication, "Dazendada Works," is one of the most prominent markers of this transition. Announcing the foundation of "*The Dazendada Film Group*," this document – which I again quote in Rice's original language and style – goes on to detail a few of The Group's plans, which include undertaking "*the construction of a film processing machine so full of holes that it will pass the most abstract film material without any complications*," purchasing "*a warehouse full of surplus film*," and embarking on a special sort of field trip that Rice describes as follows:

There will be a Grand meeting of the Group soon where everyone will gather around a new type film stock developed for shooting, afterwards everyone will go on a Universal field Trip in order to observe the universe. Reports of these experiences will thereupon be fed into the new processing machine, which it is said to be able to transform the old style black and white shooting stock into more advanced color material which allows one to climb higher, achieve more resolution of image, gain the color, and

⁵²⁷ Rice, "Diaries" 97, 104, 112, 116, 118.

⁵²⁸ Ibid 97, 116, 104, 110, 119.

*return after a few days shooting with less anxiety than previously possible.*⁵²⁹

In the dream of cinema that Rice articulates in this passage, film's redemptive potential is no longer associated with "projectable realities," as it was when Rice was completing production on *The Flower Thief*. Rather, in a manner that resembles the "LIGHTS OF SLEEP" scene Rice describes in his journal entry from the summer of 1963, the same year in which "Dazendada Works" was published, Rice here emphasizes cinema's abstractness, while also valorizing the transcendent force of perceptually demanding, psychedelic spectacles.

This shift in Rice's aesthetic preferences is not exactly visible in the footage that remains of *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*.⁵³⁰ But it is quite clear in his last completed film, *Chumlum*. The only color film that Rice produced, *Chumlum* is composed of intricately layered, hallucinatory superimpositions that Rice shot of the cast of Jack Smith's film, *Normal Love*, as they lounged about in Rice's Tribeca loft after daily shooting sessions for Smith's production. Beneath a druggy cymbalom soundtrack composed and performed by Angus MacLise (at the prodding of Tony Conrad), Smith and his cast pose, sway on hammocks, writhe, and rub against each other, sometimes rolling on the floor, swinging on ropes, or shaving each others' nipples. Drifting in and

⁵²⁹ Rice, "Dazendada Works," op. cit., 10, italics in original.

⁵³⁰ *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* has existed in at least 3 separate versions: the initial, 70-minute rough cut produced by Mead and Rice; a subsequent edit produced by Howard Everngham after Rice's death; and the currently-existing print produced by Mead in the early 1980s. However, the critic Fred Camper's observations regarding the Everngham edit remain applicable to Mead's cut as well: "One finds it hard to believe, given the complexities of *Chumlum* and *Senseless*, that had Rice completed [*The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*] entirely as he wanted to, he would not have created some of the hallucinatory confusion of all his individual other films" (Quoted in Hoberman, op. cit., 39). Camper has in fact made a similar remark regarding Mead's version, noting that it "has the look of a rough cut, especially when compared with Rice's precisely edited earlier works" ("The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man," [ChicagoReader.com](http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-queen-of-sheba-meets-the-atom-man/Content?oid=883698), accessed 2 September 2014, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-queen-of-sheba-meets-the-atom-man/Content?oid=883698>). For Mead's account of his role in editing the current version, see: Goodwin 2; and Sargeant 84.

out of view, the actors wear vibrant, ethereal fabrics with ornamental prints and patterns; dark, flowing gowns complemented with dangly bracelets or fake pearls; makeshift turbans and sashes adorned with a starfish or a sand dollar; fake mustaches and ambiguous furs; leather sandals, crocheted throws, and the occasional pair of khakis – a complex mélange of exotic costumes that evokes some unspecifiable *elsewhere*. The *mise-en-scene*, Sitney reports, “is typical of reveries under the power of hashish... [and] suggests a restrained orgy in a Moorish brothel or harem...”⁵³¹ Within this amorous, ethereal realm, bodies and objects continuously flow in and out of one another, creating a highly textured, tactile surface beneath which alternate dimensions sometimes emerge into view: an expanse of rippling water; a woman roller skating on a city street; a train rolling through a tunnel. This is a space without boundaries or base, one whose frame somehow manages to enclose “complementary shadows of the entire Universe,” and whose contents are illuminated by the “the pure colors from the depths.”⁵³²

Though *Chumlum* is not a narrative film, it is important to note the pseudo-narrative framing device that Rice employs to contextualize the *orgia* the film depicts. After the opening, title card sequence, we cut to a low-angle, exterior shot of a city street. While the street appears to be unpopulated, the frame is nevertheless cluttered. A horse-drawn carriage stands in the foreground near the center of the screen, with a dark expanse to its right and another, dark expanse at its left. Behind these largely indiscernible objects, a set of buildings rises in the background of the shot, angling dramatically toward a distant vanishing point and nearly blocking out the sky. After a moment, a young man is seen running toward the camera between the dark shapes of the street, casting nervous

⁵³¹ Sitney, “Ron Rice: SENSELESS; CHUMLUM.”

⁵³² Rice, “Diaries” 97.

glances over his shoulder and to his side as he passes out of view. He is fleeing the city, no doubt, as well as “the subway, the company, the Country, the World.”⁵³³ When we emerge out the other end of the oneiric interior into which he escapes, we find ourselves in a dense wood where a few disoriented exiles from the orgy manage to untangle themselves from tree branches, and continue frolicking on the sticks and leaves outside of a log cabin. We then see a series of shots taken around Coney Island: men run along the beach; an aerial view shows the park; a pan reveals the Parachute Jump tower; and an upside-down exposure of bumper cars is superimposed over a skyline. We have thus fallen back to earth after our extended, “*Universal field Trip*.” Yet behind these images of reality, barely-visible silhouettes of Rice’s costumed creatures remain present in the image – a lingering memory of our journey. We have returned to the world, but “*with less anxiety than previously possible*,” deposited not in the paranoid claustrophobia of the city but in a marginal space of purposeless expenditure echoing the seaside amusements of San Francisco’s Playland-at-the-Beach.

Despite this resonance with the concluding sequences of *The Flower Thief*, *Chumlum*’s pseudo-narrative framework suggests that the tension at the base of Rice’s poetic ambition required a modification of his world-building project by the time *Chumlum* was completed. Though he still seeks in this film to effect a change in his viewer by transporting her or him to a more intimate domain, this domain is no longer an ordered space in which accidents and anarchic improvisations occur, but an eternal realm where the contingency of the world is sublated into a cosmic universality.

This shift in Rice’s ideas about cinema parallels a similar transition in Mekas’s conception of the NAC’s redemptive project – a transition that one can begin to discern in

⁵³³ Ibid 89.

Mekas's writings and public addresses from the mid-to-late '60s. For instance, in his aforementioned speech, "Where Are We—the Underground?," which Mekas originally delivered to the Philadelphia College of Art in the summer of 1966, the world-transformative potential of the period is no longer located in cinema itself, but in a range of avant-garde filmmakers caught up in the violent "birth of... the Aquarian Age" who were being "blown and played by the mystical winds of the incoming Age" and "pulled by a desire for something joyful... deep in the stars."⁵³⁴ In similar statements he made at the University of Cincinnati's 1967 Spring Arts Festival, Mekas spoke of the new cinema being conducted in "the age of the spaceship [when] the earth and its three billion inhabitants is becoming an abstract small dot seen through the porthole of a spaceship."⁵³⁵ Within this context, he explained, the cinema of the Underground was beginning a new search for eternal truths, one rooted in "flickering colors and lights and sun visions."⁵³⁶ In a passage worth quoting at length, he states:

We don't want those truths... which concern... that surface where recent centuries and the recent past have built their structures. Since we reject these pasts... we are leaving them alone, and are descending where a much deeper past resides. [...] Part of this job in cinema is done by staying out of all plots and stories...; by keeping our cameras on naked bodies, fields, flowers, colors and shapes of the world, and finally by abandoning... everything touched and distorted by man's hand... The work of the new cinema is to pluck down from heaven glimpses of truth and beauty so unfamiliar and ungraspable that you will say: 'I have never seen nor felt like this before. I'm transformed; I'm changed. This is all new experience, new knowledge to me.' [...] The question is: 'What do I want to do with my life: to be consumed by the transitory manifestations of the material and the emotional worlds created by man, or to outgrow—to transcend them and to contribute to the building of a new spiritual sun?'⁵³⁷

⁵³⁴ Mekas, "Where Are We" 19, 20, 21.

⁵³⁵ Hector Currie and Michael Porte, eds., Cinema Now 1: Stan Brakhage, John Cage, Jonas Mekas, Stan Vanderbeek (Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati Press, 1968) 12.

⁵³⁶ Ibid 12.

⁵³⁷ Ibid 12-13.

In this statement, the NAC's hostility to worldliness gains its most dramatic and symptomatic expression. Mekas denounces the material structures built on the surface of the earth in "recent centuries," everything produced by "man's hand," and all established emotional, experiential, and epistemological frameworks – objects and conventions that he believed were preventing artists from "re-attun[ing] ourselves, step by step, with the life forces."⁵³⁸ Though Mekas's statements in this symposium reiterate many points he put forward in earlier writings, most notably his 1959 call for "a complete derangement of the official cinematic senses," the direction of the NAC's rebellion is here framed in quite different terms. Rather than promoting transformative encounters with the concreteness of reality that "cut into one's consciousness with the sharpness of a lash," the task of the artist is now framed as an effort to discern a guiding light in the depths of the sun, and to find some paradisiacal "now" existing between "our memory of Eden" and "the godhead toward which we are going."⁵³⁹ Within the context of a culture in which all manifestations of worldliness seemed tainted by the destructive legacy of modernity, the world-building ambitions of the NAC could only be realized by gaining access to a mystical realm of pure vitality cut free from the world. Confronted with a dominant American culture hostile to all alternative configurations of intimacy and vitality, and confounded by the contradictions of a discourse that could only "bring man home" by first departing from "man's home on earth," the artists of the NAC turned their gaze to the stars.

⁵³⁸ Ibid 12.

⁵³⁹ Mekas, "Movie Journal," Village Voice 1 July 1959: 6; Currie and Porte 14, 12.

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