Hallelujah for Prague: An American Orbis Picta

Gerald O’Grady

"And your own life, while it's happening to you
never has any atmosphere until it's a memory."


It was in November, 1968 that Miles Glazer telephoned me at The Media Center which I had established at 3512 Mount Vernon Street in Houston under the patronage of John and Dominique de Menil, and asked if I would be interested in screening a film about which he briefly described the conditions of production. I met him and Jan Nemec for the first time a few hours later, and Oratorio for Prague was screened on November 15, together with Nemec’s Report on the Party and the Guests, a political parable about a group of people who, for reasons ranging from opportunism to sheer terror, are members of a party they have no desire to join in. Nemec, with Glazer acting as producer, had made a documentary about the Czechoslovakia of 1968, about liberated political prisoners, liberated clergymen who again held religious services, and about the Prague hippies and their friendship with foreign flower children who, that summer, had journeyed there from all over Europe. Josef Švěrček wrote the commentary, and it was edited at the Vodkoda Street laboratories on August 19, 1968. Jan Nemec roused his camaraderie on the morning of August 20, filmed the Russian tanks invading Prague, and immediately took that part of the film across the border to be shown on television, and then Needied the whole film into Oratorio for Prague.

The film had had its American premiere at the Sixth Annual New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center’s Philharmonic Hall on September 28, 1968. The front page of The New York Times of September 30 carried a story from Prague by Ted Szulc, “30 Years Later, Prague Remembers Munich,” which quoted the words of President Eduard Beneš on the afternoon of September 30, 1938: “There is no precedent in history for treating an independent nation and state in such a way,“ and went on to make comparisons with the Soviet-led invasion of August 20, 1968, and reported that, during the post-invasion days, “MUNICH – Yalta” had been scrawled on many Prague walls, a reference to the agreement of 1945, which united the Soviet States. Inside the paper, film critic Renata Adler described Oratorio for Prague as “a film so moving that one is near tears from the first moment” and ended her review: “Nemec, who will be returning to Prague in a few weeks to begin another film, was greeted with a prolonged ovation by the festival audience, which was as obviously and profoundly moved as any audience I have ever seen.” In Houston, I went to meet Jan Nemec soon returned to Houston and began to script a feature film on heart transplants. Drs. Michael De Bakey and Denton Cooley were then making medical history at St. Luke’s and Texas Children’s Hospitals just after Christian Barnard had performed the first heart transplant in South Africa in 1967. My colleague of mine, Professor William Akers of Rice University was already exploring the interaction between the human body of all of the various metals and amalgams which could serve to construct a truly artificial heart (not to be achieved until the Jarvik 7 in 1980). I also knew Dr. Irving A. Craft, a psychologist who was part of the heart transplant project. It is difficult now, almost a quarter-century later, to recall the excitement and anxieties about that new matter of vital organ transplants, but I remember Dr. Craft was interested, for example, in how these first transplant patients in history felt about having another person’s organs providing their central functions, and how they integrated these different physical parts into a psychic unity. Although he and his colleagues always acted with the greatest discretion, mentioning no names and simply sketching out situational details, it was through them that I learned, anecdotally, about a few of the somewhat bizarre circumstances which surrounded those efforts on the operating table which were making international headlines. It involved how ordinary people would act when survival was at stake.

Those eligible for heart transplants would move into motels surrounding the hospital, such as Tides II across from Main Street. Then, on the hospital floor, they would expose to the sun their forearms, on which a donor’s skin had been grafted to test receptivity, in order to make it appear that there was a match. These potential recipients, who sometimes did not have long to live, were often accompanied by their families, who purchased radio equipment and monitored all highway accidents, night and day, as this might prove a source to replace the heart of their loved one. If there were an automobile fatality, the families would descend on the hospital to take the victim’s heart matched that of their kin. Jokes abounded. Cardiologists, afraid of becoming cadavers, wore scrappards reading: “If I am injured, do not make me to St. Luke’s Hospital!” patients already there were said to have signs on their beds: “I am not a donor. I am simply asleep.”

I would try to amuse Jan Nemec with such tidbits of information at the Lamar Towers on 2929 Buffalo Speedway, where he was the guest of Miles Glazer, and was astonished at the force of his sight as it began to evolve. I was a dedicated surrealista, an admirer of absurd drama, and a devotee of black humor, but the plot of Nemec, then deeply illustrated man became one of the most effective of heart invasion horror beyond all of them: the hearts of aborted babies were to be bought, and grown to normal healthy size in a factory, like a greenhouse, which would be pumping blood around the clock—like computer time-saving—and these hearts would be owned and controlled by underground organizations which would sell them only to dictators, so that they could remain permanently in power. The world’s political economy would go off the gold standard and on to the heart standard. There was also much discussion at that time about the world’s population explosion, and some theorists put forward the principle that parents would be allowed to replicate, that is, reproduce themselves so that there would be zero growth. Nemec went them one better by determining that one of the two children would be a spare-parts child for the other, and he called this group “coolies” in honor of both the Chinese and Dr. Denton Cooley. According to Vlado Havel’s recent self-portrait, Disturbing the Peace (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 59, together with Jan Nemec, he developed this scenario for a film, called Heart-Beat, and when I talked with Nemec by telephone on June 14, 1990, at the Barrandov Studios in Prague, where he was shooting his first feature film in 22 years, The Heat of Royal Love, the script of Heart-Beat, which currently exists in Czech, is being translated into English and forwarded to Miles Glazer in Houston, who still retains the rights to it.
The film is my own modest contribution to a difficult and necessary struggle. There are too many such headmasters about, and their color (if my Cat weren't on hand to fix it) would never be one and the same for long, because like chameleons, they are ready to change it at the drop of a hat. It is these people we have to fight if the world is to be a better place.

Alexander Hammid, ca. 1942-43. Photograph by Maya Deren.

Maya Deren, ca. 1942-43. Photograph by Alexander Hammid.
The tragic events of August 21, 1968, one day. Its structure, jumping back and forth from performance of Vaclav Havel’s A Private View, directed one evening in a French Restaurant in Washington, D.C. and which best narrates his reaction of three characters, visiting Rome when they hear number of characters who meet on the most important moments of Czechoslovak tradition in America. Catrina Nieman, on whose account I have been drawing here, wrote: “Meshe of the Afternoon is considered by many to be Dorn’s best film. Its power is very largely due to Hammid’s cinematography and editing, a fact which has been described as more and more in recent years (p. 15).

Just as Lincoln Center, the Museum of Modern Art, and Anthology Film Archives kept alive the spirit of Czech film, it should be recounted that The Public Theater kept fidelity to Czech drama from 1968 when Václav Havel himself spent six weeks in the United States during May and June and Joseph Papp directed his The Memorandum. It seems that Papp invited Havel to the United States just as he was being sent to prison. In a letter to his wife written on New Year’s Eve, 1979, Havel advised her: “When you speak with the lawyer, ask him if he’s been able to determine whether my letter to Mr. Papp has been forwarded to the court. If not, write him yourself, thank him for his offer and explain to him why I could not accept it...” (Letters to Olga, June - September, 1982, translated by Paul Wilson [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988], p. 63). Marketa Gertz-Stankiewicz reports that Havel’s three one-act plays, Interview, Protest, and Private View were performed at The Public Theater during the 1983-84 season, directed by Lee Grant (Drama Contemporary Czechoslovakia [New York: Performing Arts Journal Publication, 1985], p. 13). Richard Foreman directed Largo Desolato there in 1987 and Jiří Zíka’s Temptation in 1989. Playwright Arthur Miller also made known his tem deputizing with Vaclav Havel when he wrote the monologue, I Think About You, a Great

From performance of Václav Havel’s A Private View, directed by Lee Grant at The Public Theater, 1983. Photograph by Martha Swapo.

Deal, for performance at The International Theater Festival in Avignon on July 21, 1982 (Jan Vladislav, ed., Václav Havel: Living in Truth [London: Faber & Faber, 1987], pp. 263-265). The title line itself is an exact quotation from Havel’s own play, Protest, and Miller’s set, with the wastepaper bag, alluded to that in Havel’s The Memorandum. Miller’s line: “In some indescribable we are each other’s continuation” echoes the thought of a line—“The lives of people who are close to one another overlap”—from Miller’s monologue, “From the Diary of a Counterrevolutionary,” translated by George Theiner (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972). Kohout himself is best known in the United States as a playwright (Poor Murderer, Fire in the Basement), but Diary is an excellent account of the events of 1968 and their historical context. In the book, three diaries alternate with each other: the first, by a citizen, follows a number of characters who meet on the most important moments of Czechoslovak history from 1944 to 1967, 23 years; the second, the actual diary of Pavel Kohout, is an account of the spring, fall, and winter of 1968, one year; and the third, the diary of a tourist, recounts the reactions of three characters, visiting Rome when they overhear the tragic events of August 21, 1968, one day. Its structure, jumping back and forth in time over a 23-year period, is much like this essay, which borrows from it. My first faculty appointment, the Media Center of the American Film Institute in Houston in 1968 was the American, James Blue. He made a feature film in Algeria, Les Oliviers de la Justice (The Olive Trees of Justice) in 1962 which won the Critics Prize for Best Film at the Cannes Film Festival that year and is still shown in French public in half; I have over 200 reviews and responses to it published in French newspapers during the following year. He had also made The March, a documentary of the March on Washington on August 29, 1963, which he directed, edited, wrote, and read the narrative. He joined me on the basis of a poem by Robert Graves, which I had handed him one evening in a French Restaurant in Washington, D.C. and which best expressed, I felt, the thrust of the media program which I wished to start; para-doxically, it contained no visual images and could not be camera-ized.

IN BROKEN IMAGES

He is quick, thinking in clear images; I am slow, thinking in broken images.

He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images; I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images.

Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance; Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.

Assuming their relevance, he assumes the fact; Questioning their relevance, I question the fact.

When the fact falls him, he questions his senses; When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.

He continues quick and dull in his clear images; I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.

He is in a new confusion of his understanding; I am in a new understanding of my confusion.

After accepting his contract, Blue was unable to come for the first semester because he was asked to assist František Daniel, its first Dean, in designing the concept and curriculum for the American Film Institute for Advanced Study, which President Lyndon B. Johnson had founded, along with the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. It was the first American attempt to form a national film school, and as one can find in the Stanford Report, a background research document which advised the government on its establishment, its model was the Eastern European Film Schools, particularly the Prague Film and Television Academy. František Daniel had been born and educated in Czechoslovakia where he studied music at the Prague Conservatory and film and television at the Prague Film and Television Academy. Daniel had worked for 14 years at the Barrandov Studios, and for five years he had been Dean of the Prague Film and Television Academy. His film work in Czechoslovakia centered on his writing scripts for feature films, including two, Daddy Wanted and Last September, which he directed himself. He had produced and directed Largo Desolato, directed on Main Street, one of the films to be screened at The Public Theater. The theater was afterwards involved in the Czech New Wave, the films of Milos Forman, Ivan Passer, and others. Earlier, he had been active in the post-Stalinist theater which produced films such as Three Wishes for Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos (1958), The End of the Clown (1964), September Nights by Vojtech Jasny (1959), and There are Lions by Václav Krška (1959), all of which were suppressed at the Bánksy Bystrica conference in 1960, and Daniel himself was forbidden to make films for a


year and the production association Feix-Daniel had been liquidated. He left for the United States on April 26, 1969 when he learned that Alexander Dubček was to be deposed.

He made an enormous contribution to American film studies in both production and analysis. From the outset, the American Film Institute, as an organization, was troubled with management problems, and I myself felt strongly enough to testify against its failures before a Congressional Committee in 1975 chaired by John Brademeyer, then the President of New York University (“To Amend the National Foundation of the Arts and Humanities Act of 1966,” Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Education and Labor on H.R. 17021, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, U.S. House of Representatives). When Daniel was tragically dismissed from the American Film Institute in 1974, he was the recipient of a Ford Foundation grant to study curricula issues in American film and television education and while serving as Henry Luce Professor of Creativity at Carleton College in Minnesota, he frequently visited Houston and Buffalo. James Blue recorded more than thirty hours of his lectures at the American Film Institute; at the Media Center in Houston; by then housed at Rice University; and at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Some of those recorded at the American Film Institute were transcribed by Blue himself and they clearly indicate how the exercises of the Prague school and the analysis of Czech productions by its recent graduates (e.g., Ivan Passer’s Intimate Lighting) became part of American film education.
That was just the beginning of Daniel's contribution to education in this country. With Miloš Forman, he established the Graduate Film School at Columbia University in 1977. James Blue who, by then, had joined me in Buffalo, was to share his life between Buffalo and Columbia and Colin Young's National Film School in Great Britain before his sudden death in 1980. Daniel later went on to become the Dean of the School of Film and Television at the University of Southern California, and Vojtech Jasny, another Czech director of the 60's, three of whose films will be shown at The Public Theater, succeeded him. Jasny's first American film for television, Miloš Forman: A Portrait, was produced for The American Masters series for transmission on PBS in February, 1990. Daniel has also served as the guiding spirit of Robert Redford's Sundance Institute in Utah, dedicated to helping young directors develop their first feature project with the assistance and advice of accomplished professionals, and he recently founded the Flemish European Media Institute (FEMI) which attempts to perform the same service, with more emphasis on scriptwriting rather than on production, for Common Market filmmakers, convening in different countries each year, with meetings already held in Barcelona and West Berlin.

When I moved to Buffalo, Blue had remained behind in Houston as the new Director of The Media Center. While I mentioned his filmmaking earlier, I should now, in relation to his transcription of the Daniel lectures, describe his unique contribution to the history of American and international independent cinema by conducting and publishing interviews with film directors. His great mastery of the interview form had begun with a Ford Foundation grant in 1964 which allowed him to travel all over the world to interview 30 film directors who had begun to use non-actors in their work. Those with Pier Paolo Pasolini, Albert Maysles, Jean Rouch, Richard Leacock, Satyajit Ray, Shirley Clarke, Cesare Zavattini, Peter Watkins, Jean-Luc Godard, and Roberto Rossellini, which were published in Film Comment, Cahiers du Cinema, and Objectif, were widely acknowledged as the most useful materials available in film courses. His interview with Miloš Forman, republished in this tabloid, was printed in Cahiers in 1967, before he had met Daniel, and is a superb example of how a film director, by asking the right questions, can “direct” another film director to clearly reveal and articulate his or her own processes of film production. At Buffalo, he helped me establish the Oral History of the American Independent Cinema, and did extended interviews with John Marshall and Robert Gardner, among others, and with Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner, the latter providing basic information for William Alexander's Films on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931-1942 (Princeton University Press, 1981).

While he was still in Houston, through Miles Glaser, James Blue was introduced to Miloš Forman and met Ivan Passer when they first emigrated to this country and he conducted four 45-minute interviews with them on 16mm film: Lighting and Lenses, Structure and Writing, and Non-Actors--I quote from the labels on the film cans. Only the original elements of this film ever existed and, until a few months ago, the soundtrack had been considered lost, but it was recently discovered and filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker, who founded Living Archives, is now seeing it through the printing process. In Houston, on November 15, 1990, the South West Alternate Media Project (SWAMP), the restructured and revitalized survivor of The Media Center which I founded there, will premiere a together with a screening of Oratorio for Prague, to mark that important date in its history of 22 years ago. When Forman and Passer were first in this country, before they had directed any of their American films, at Blue's suggestion, they came to Buffalo to lecture on their films on several occasions--it was a case of sheer survival at that time.

Conversations with Frank Daniel—June 10, 1969

Suggested Exercises:

Best way for doing these exercises would be to combine them with writing exercises. One scenario might be to see two parts of the film, and then to write about them. Then you gradually begin to discover that there is something more:

- The lunch with the fried chicken only seems a normal moment. In reality it is a "put on" facade which crumbles--like the house which is not yet finished or the chicken on the new car.

- The relationship emerges even in this holy moment. And the search for the holy is frustrated.

- The irony is in how concretely Passer sees these things. They start an argument while playing. The relationships emerge even in this holy moment. And the search for the holy is frustrated.

- The one came from Prague to show how successful he is.

- The other attempts to demonstrate from the beginning how well off he is in the country.

- Both discover neither are happy.

To show this: Passer found the scene on the road in the middle of the night when both in their drunkenEmbarrassment.

- The next morning they are back at breakfast and the special drink sticks in the glass.

- There is no one scene in the film which does not contain the controversy of the theme. But in the beginning there are scenes which seem only one sided. The theme develops and you discover later thematic elements in the earlier scenes.

- The lunch with the fried chicken only seems a normal moment. In reality it is a "put on" facade which crumbles--like the house which is not yet finished or the chicken on the new car.

Conversations with Frank Daniel—April 28, 1970

The Structure:

We now have the weapons. We must look for the best use of materials to find the best expression of the theme.

So we re-examine all the characters at our disposal to find the main character who will be the best demonstration of the theme, i.e.: "Frightening" (Intimate Lighting).

We see in Intimate Lighting that the musician from the city has qualities, talents. He has succeeded in his life.

The girl friend is important because she demonstrates that he belongs to another world than the farm family—a freer one.

At first the film seems present only a small episode which helps to assure the musician from the city that his way of life is the right one.

Then you gradually begin to discover that there is something more:

- All the small scenes—the car, the supper, the house, the dinner—all create strange vibrations in this man (the city musician who is visiting the farm), and he begins to get deeper into the life of these people and see himself in them.

- The old man has an adventurous past, his wife was a circus rider.

- The musician now begins to see two parts of these people. He meets their dreams. They are still alive. The people carry them with them.

Then the quartet starts.

The city girl is a nice butterfly, she takes fun from everything, unable to understand the musician’s inner feeling of frustration. He brought her to the farm as he might have worn a tie or a hat—just to show his success.

But during the quartet, he is in a serious and meaningful moment, a sanctified and holy moment that they are creating.

- The irony is in how concretely Passer sees these things. They start an argument while playing. The relationships emerge even in this holy moment. And the search for the holy is frustrated.

- Later the host opens the refrigerator and takes the meat—all material goods are here. They play Beethoven and eat. And what emerges is that both friends are in the same situation of frustration.

- The one came from Prague to show how successful he is.

- The other attempts to demonstrate from the beginning how well off he is in the country.

- Both discover neither are happy.

To show this: Passer found the scene on the road in the middle of the night when both friends are present. Both in their drunkenness.

- The next morning they are back at breakfast and the special drink sticks in the glass.

- There is no one scene in the film which does not contain the controversy of the theme. But in the beginning there are scenes which seem only one sided. The theme develops and you discover later thematic elements in the earlier scenes.

- The lunch with the fried chicken only seems a normal moment. In reality it is a "put on" facade which crumbles--like the house which is not yet finished or the chicken on the new car.

Chelsea Hotel
22 West 23 Street
New York, New York 10011

Dear Miloš Forman,

I'm writing again to invite you to the State University of New York at Buffalo. We had hoped that you would come a year ago with Taking Off—you'd probably remember that my Houston friend, Mike Glaser, contacted you about it—but the company wouldn't let us have the film as it had not yet had a commercial showing in Buffalo. As the students here see Loves of a Blonde and Firemen's Ball often, that presented a problem.

This summer, I saw Black Peter and Audition at Clem Perry's theatre in NYC and, and I am wondering if you would like to discuss your films after a screening of Black Peter. It might be possible, if you thought it a wise idea, to show parts of a filmed interview which you and Passer did with James Blue in Houston—he would be agreeable to sending it to me.

You can actually leave NY about five in the afternoon and arrive in Buffalo for the evening screening and discussion, and you can get back to NY by eight the next morning. If you would care to come a bit earlier in the day, I'd be delighted to take you to Niagara Falls and through the Albright-Knox Museum, our two natural and curious wonders!

I'll telephone you in a few days in the hope that we can arrange something. I saw a very good film a few days ago, and recommend it to you if you haven't seen it, as I think you would want to--Dusan Makavejev's Innocence Unprotected.

Very best wishes to you.

Sincerely,

Gerald O'Grady

September 1, 1971

an artist's colony where he shared land with John Cage and others, to watch Stan Vanderbeek experiment in the "Movie-Drome" which he had constructed, from an old silo, into an audio-visual laboratory for simultaneous projection of dance, magic theatre, sound, and film. As many as forty super-8 and 16mm projectors would be operating in this Laterna Magica. Vanderbeek was also a pioneer in computer graphics and telephone murals and later presented eight hours of dream images operatinginthisLaterna Magica. Vanderbeek was alsoa pioneerincomputer

Andy Warhol at the Factory 1963-64. Photograph by Ugo Mulas.

"pansophy," I would have better known how to assimilate Stan Vanderbeek, one of my most cherished friends. From Vanderbeek's silo, I would proceed to Andy Warhol's silver foil-lined Factory at Union Square West to observe him and Paul Morrissey in their attempts at an entirely different kind of cinema. Andy Warholha, as the 1950 portrait of his first friend, Philip Pearlstein, is called, as that was the name he knew him by, had been born to immigrant Roman Catholic Czech parents at the beginning of the American Depression, had grown up near the mills of Pittsburgh, and was to become the most famous Czech-American of the century.

The crystal-synching of the 16 millimeter Auricon camera with the Kudelski sound-synch recording of the lives of real people, and, in an affluent society, this new "low-priced" equipment was accessible enough so that the telephone and the television have restructured our twentieth-century consciousness, a theme I shall touch upon later. Later, in The Philosophy of Andy Warhol's 60's (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), pp. 109-110:

I never liked the idea of picking out certain scenes and pieces of time and putting them together, because then it ends up being different from what really happened—it's just not like life, it seems so corny. What I liked was chunks of time all together, every real moment... I only wanted to find great people and let them be themselves and talk about what they usually talked about and I'd film them for a certain length of time and that would be the movie... To play the poor little rich girl in the movie, Edie [Sedgwick] didn't need a script—if she'd needed a script, she wouldn't have been right for the part.

The films, then, were essentially undirected and people were allowed to play out their own fantasies and to explore the transformation of their own personalities and identities, and some were adopting mythic names from popular culture, such as Ultra Violet, International Velvet, and Ingrid Superstar. The camera lens had become a Rorschach mirror. (Warhol did a Rorschach series of paintings in 1964.) Warhol himself was always keenly attuned to the perception of actuality. When he showed Lonesome Cowboys in Houston, he told reporter Nathan Fain: "I'm not sure if I should pretend that things are real or that they're fake. You see, to pretend something's real, I'd have to fake it. Then people would think I'm doing it real" (Houston Post, November 17, 1968).

Certainly one of Warhol's strangest films was based on his meeting, in the mid-60's, with the star, Hedwige Kiesler or Hedy Lamarr, of one of the great classics of Czech and world cinema, Ecstasy (1933), directed by Gustav Machaty, the first director of the Warhol family's native land to enter the film histories. Warhol met Hedy Lamarr, the shoplifter, and her experience of being arrested, as recounted in her book, Ecstasy and Me (1965), became the basis of his Hedy, also known as The Most Beautiful Woman in the World, or The Shoplifter, or The Fourteen Year Old Girl (1965, 70 minutes). The transvestite, Mario Montez, played Hedy Lamarr and, according to Stephen Koch (Stargazer: Andy Warhol's World and His Films [New York: Praeger, 1973], p. 75), this was the only film of that whole period on which Warhol himself was the cameraman; apparently he got bored with the performance, and instead of his camera intensely focussing on the subject, as had Jan Stallich's, the cameraman of Ecstasy, Warhol filmed the walls and the ceiling of The Factory. In the Czech summer of 1968, Vanderbeek and I had been pre-occupied in Houston with the murder of Robert Kennedy and the attempted murder of Warhol which took place within hours of each other on our west and east coasts on June 5. One of the reasons that Vanderbeek was willing to come to Houston was that a threat on his own life had been made by Valerie Solanas, the founder of S.C.U.M., the Society for Cutting Up Men, because he had not been interested in producing her scripts. She then shot Warhol. She had made her sole appearance in one of this films, I.A Man, a year earlier. She had also written a script, Up Your Ass, that was so vile that Warhol thought she was a police agent sent to entrap him. It has not been sufficiently noted that Andy Warhol had a well-developed aural sensibility. Shortly after his operation, when he was still under heavy sedation, I talked to him in his hospital room where John de Menil had called to check on his welfare, and he insisted that I keep talking—on and on and on. I remember John de Menil
Gerald O'Grady — photograph by Ruth Abraham, printing by Stan Vanderbeek (1968)

When something's happening, you fantasize about other things. When I woke up somewhere—I didn’t know it was at the hospital and that Bobby Kennedy had been shot the day after I was—I heard fantasy words about thousands of people being in St. Patrick's Cathedral praying and carrying on, and then I heard the word 'Kennedy' and that brought me back to the television world again because then I realized, well, here I was, in pain.

When Warhol had heard, in 1963, that John Kennedy was shot, he had gone home to his studio at 87th Street off Lexington, a firehouse, and made a silkscreen of Dracula biting a girl’s neck. In Houston, Vanderbeek, a gifted collageist, responded to that summer’s shockwaves by making an animated film in which his drawings of human heads were continually blown apart and the human systems of audio-visual sensory perceptions, seen in the displacement of eyes and ears and speech. On the soundtrack, a human voice cried: "Oh! Oh! Oh! . . ." He dedicated it to "O. myself, because of our shared sorrow, and gave me the enclosed word/portrait as he left Houston.

From The Factory, I would go to The Chelsea Hotel to visit the extraordinary tin-welded tent-shaped structure on its roof, built as an addition to the top-floor apartment of Shirley Clarke and known as the TV TP (the Television Tepee), where she devoted herself to turning people on to video. Some had old-fashioned oval receiving tubes—would be piled in the shape of totem poles on each floor, and cameras were located on each floor as well. One floor, not necessarily the top, would put the image of one of its temporary inhabitants in the top monitor, and the other floors would show the midsection and legs from two other persons on the other two monitors, and the trick was to physically operate our portapaks so that the composite human figures would dance in rhythm—sometimes, these figures danced on their own heads. This was called Playing Picasso. This was more like a jack-o-laternamagica and had the character of a Halloween party. The two Czechs, Forman and Passer, lived at the Chelsea and I would see them under the tepee. These silos, silver marias, and tepees, which have become sacred places in retrospect, were, at that time, simply gathering places of friends, and little did I realize that they were transforming my own career.

Shirley Clarke had also started "The Tepee Videospace Troupe" which would travel to campuses to give public performances of interactive video "games" of the kind mentioned above and, in enclosing part of a letter which I wrote at that time to recommend her activities for financial support, I would encourage the reader to relate it to Marshall McLuhan’s chapter on Games in Understanding Media (1964).

Erik Erikson was then writing his books on the processes by which our identities were constructed (Childhood and Society, 1950 and Identity and the Life Cycle, 1959), and the pioneer work of R.D. Laing (The Divided Self) and other books was making us all aware of our multiple selves and exploding our previous descriptions of sanity and insanity. Clarke was using the electronic mirror of video both compositionally (the totem) and socially (performance) to make us question our received notions of both identity and community. Her famous film, Portrait of Jason (1967), explored, in a way again different from Warhol and the other filmmakers mentioned, the border crossing between reality and fiction.

To her career which begins as a touring dancer, she has incorporated all of the arts, and now loops back or recycles it to continue as a touring video trouper performing what is itself a continuing cycle. I have spent many fascinating hours at her tepee atop the Chelsea Hotel, an almost fully equipped video studio of her own design, witnessing the development of the totem concept. One example: four different people are given cameras to record parts of the bodies—heads, torsos, legs, etc.—of four other people; these images are then assembled and reassembled, always in live time, on four video monitors piled up in the form of a totem; the exploration is unending as various visual matchings, makeups and metaphors are formed; one’s precepts and concepts of art, visual thinking, play, human social cooperation, and, in the largest sense, reality itself are stimulated.

Her work is hard to label or characterize but I would define it as interactive, cooperative, performance-oriented jazz video and thus distinguishing it from the more environmental pieces of Frank Gillette, the meditative work of Peter Campus, the playful happenings of Nam June Paik, and the synthesizer work of Stephen Beck, to name but a few video artists who also have major stature . . . . Support of her work might be the quickest way to socialize some of the video potentials which she elaborates upon in her project. Here is dialogic versus discursive television.

When her group appeared in Buffalo on September 6-8, 1974, she handed our audience this statement as an introduction to its performance:

Will the human beings opt for the re-creation of life through non-biological means, that is, through technology, and thereby eventually give up their human intelligence and human spirit to machines or will we make the political-socio-ecological decision to retain our human reality and together with technology and art develop a true humanist solution? We have chosen as artists to make friends with the machine. We invite you to join us in the most important political choice of this century.

I mention the activities of Shirley Clarke, and others, in this essay in light of Vaclav Havel’s classic, “The Power of the Powerless” (October, 1978), which has been published in Vaclav Havel, or Living in Truth. Near the end of that essay (pp. 114-115), Havel wrote:

Our attention, therefore, inevitably turns to the most essential matter: the crisis of contemporary technological society as a whole, the crisis that Heidegger describes as the impiety of humanity face to face with the planetary power of technology. Technology—that child of modern science, which in turn is a child of modern metaphysics—is out of humanity’s control, has ceased to serve us, has enslaved us and compelled us to participate in the preparation of our own destruction. And humanity can find no way out: we have no idea and no faith, and even less do we have a political conception to help us bring things back under human control.

Only a God can save us now, Heidegger says, and he emphasizes the necessity of ‘a different way of thinking’, that is, of a departure from what philosophy has been for centuries, and a radical change in the way in which humanity understands itself, the world and its position in it. He knows no way out and all he can recommend is preparing for salvation.

Readers of Havel will remember that, in the very next sentence, he insists that any real revolution in human affairs must not be ‘merely philosophical, merely social, merely technological . . . but that “its most intrinsic locus can only be human existence.” And I tell here a New York story about Frantisek Daniel and James Blue who happened later, in 1980, but illustrates the spirit of both men and of our times together. It involves a young Czech student, Oleg Harenčar, who somehow crossed the border to Switzerland when he was 19, only to find that there were no schools that offered a curriculum in film. A year later, he arrived at Kennedy Airport on a Friday, with so money, no place to stay, and no plans, other than his still being a Czech student. He then looked up Frantisek Daniel—he had never met either man—and arrived at his airport at 11:00 P.M., and begged him to accept him into Columbia. By 5:00 A.M., they had discovered that Daniel knew his father in law, as “broad-shoulder” Frantisek Daniel had sent to Moscow to get his doctorates at the same time, and Daniel had actually attended his parents’ wedding. But he could still not be admitted to Columbia because it accepted only graduate students and Harenčar did not yet have an undergraduate degree. James Blue was in Daniel’s kitchen when he had arrived, stopping over for a visit as he flew from Buffalo to Houston. Before he left to get a 7:00 A.M. flight, he gave Harenčar the money for the 600-mile bustrip to Buffalo and the key to his house at 80 Mariner Street, and assured him that he would gain admittance to our Center for Media Study at the State University of New York at Buffalo, as soon as he himself flew back from Houston on Monday. Harenčar graduated in 1985, with television productions of Ionesco’s Rhinoceros and Make a Joyful Noise, a study of family, church, and other Black musical groups, and then moved from performing traditional church hymns to a more secular gospel music. He now makes and teaches film in Mendocino, California. Earlier this year, he flew to Moscow to film the Russian circus and, on his way “home,” visited his father in Prague, who proudly introduced him as “my own, the American citizen.” Robert Harenčar, a dissident, had been relegated in recent years to serving as an economist for a collective of disabled people—a step above window-cleaning and furnace-tending, it seems—and is now the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs under Jiří Dienstbier.
The Kitchen, 240 Mercer Street, New York

After I finished the Buffalo/Texas/New York stint, I began to teach weekly at Buffalo and in the Graduate Department of Cinema Studies at New York University. One of the seminars I taught for graduate students included day-long visits to the lofts of artists whom I felt were transforming the structure of the electronic image. It was at one of these sessions that I first met Woody and Steina Vasulka at 111 East 14th Street, where they had altered a former garment altering shop to the needs of video. It was soon thereafter that I invited them to join Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits at the Center for Media Study. (Tony Conrad, James Blue, and the theorist and historian Brian Henderson came later.) Bohuslav Vasulka was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia and took the name Woody when he heard Woody Herman records on “The Blue Danube,” an American military radio station transmitting from Vienna. He once told me that he had wanted to emigrate since he was six years old, and after attending the Prague Film and Television Academy, he did so by marrying Steinunn Bjarnadottir and becoming an Icelandic citizen with the name of Timoteus Petursson. He worked in Algeria and Iceland and then came to New York in 1965. He clearly recognized that there was no hope in the United States for 35mm feature film as a cultural art, for which he had been trained, and he contacted Alexander Hammid and went to work on a multi-screen film for Francis Thompson with whom Hammid was then associated. Soon thereafter he founded The Kitchen which became the first and most important exhibition venue for video and other electronic arts in New York City and the entire United States. Under the influence of audio synthesis experimentation at Automation House and elsewhere and through his collaboration with Alfons Schilling, Vasulka abandoned narrativity or “the story” and began a relentless 25-year long exploration of the surface of the image, its principles of organizing energy, which has made him, together with Nam June Paik from Korea, the central force of experimental video art in the United States. Schilling, originally from Switzerland but schooled in Vienna was involved in building “seeing machines” and in binocular performances which re-organized mental space in binary images—at some time, they must have touched on Frederick Kiesler’s 1928 design for a “space stage” at the Eighth Street Cinema in New York, which would accommodate both theatre and motion pictures, another early latema magica, as Schilling was certainly familiar with the earlier Austrian avant-garde. In 1967, Schilling had also worked on editing Francis Thompson’s three-screen film for the American Pavilion at the Montreal Expo. That summer, when Steina Vasulka went back to Iceland for a visit, he and Woody Vasulka moved into a loft over a Hero Sandwich Shop at 128 Front Street, formerly occupied by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and there, Schilling later told me, they were like “two little boys at play.” They removed the claw mechanism from the camera so as to make an endless photograph, and they developed a rotating mirrored sphere which simultaneously recorded all that could be seen of the world from all angles.

Like the experiments of the others which I have been describing, these involved some or all of these four features: (1) a desire to place technology at the service of human development; (2) a thrust toward a totality, as full as possible as immersion in the actual world; (3) an impulse to describe life as it was actually lived and perceived, with all its accidents and chance elements; and (4) an attempt to expand human perception. The cinema verite of the period was only one aspect of the new desire to “live in truth.” Schilling invented a machine which, when attached to one’s hand, enlarged the distance between the eyes and gave one the illusion of being a giant since, in accord with the laws of parallax vision, all of the objects in the world now were perceived, in a Lilliputian way, as much smaller, and also elongated. He later built a “darkroom hut” of black cloth, which was stretched on rods of wood, attached on top of his head by means of an African straw hat and then pulled up and tied securely around his waist so that no light entered this homemade “magic lantern,” which had a small peephole at which he could look out, as he did at the cameraman in the photograph accompanying this text. The images from the outside world were perceived by him on a rear projection screen attached to the horizontal wooden rod supporting the cloth, and he could slide this screen on the rod to increase or decrease the size of the image, which, however, was perceived upside down and reversed from left to right. With this complete change of perception, he would attempt to walk through the actual world, a task which was complicated further by the fact that persons or objects dispensing voices or sounds would be heard from the one side but seen on the other side. Another of his experiments (1973) involved replacing his own eyes with video camera systems which were connected to two small receivers. He could actually remove his “eyes,” place them on a table, and by training the camera on himself, see behind him, or one “eye” could look forward and the other behind him at the same time. While Vasulka was teaching at Buffalo, Schilling was a visiting faculty member for two different semesters.
Vasulka had begun as a scriptwriter at FAMU, investigating what he retrospectively calls poetic space, and gradually moved through film space into video space and, now, on into digital space. He no longer had any interest whatsoever in straightforward representation, either documentary or fictional, of the so-called actual world. When he visited Czechoslovakia in 1974, he was not interested in the depiction of Telč, but in displaying the portapak images on a scan-processor and then feeding an identical image signal into its vertical deflection system, translating the energy structure of the original image into a vertical position of scan lines. In Brno, he took the farmyard of his youth in Moravia, a place of reminiscence, and vertically deflected the raster lines, according to their intensities, creating what he called "a topographical map of the brightness of the image."

Currently, Vasulka is collaborating with Peter Weibel, his radio still set to "The Blue Danube," and others to simultaneously document real events in a variety of media (sound, image, text, speech), and by means of their storage in a common numerical code on a CD-ROM disk, investigate how a human's experience of the event could be continually restructured and transformed through new combinations and recombinations of these materials which would construct new interactive modulations between the different sensory modes. Weibel, who currently teaches at the State University of New York at Buffalo and, with Alfons Schilling, at the Hochschule fur angewandte Kunst in Vienna, and at the Institut fur Neue Medien in Frankfurt, has long been involved in reconstituting the electronic image by the vibrations of his own body motions and live rock-music performance on guitar, linking himself and his instrument directly to the television raster, and together with Henry Jesionka and the composer David Felder, also both at Buffalo, is presenting a live performance of jazz trombonist Miles Anderson before an interactive video wall of 32 pre-recorded and computer-controlled images of his performance from multiple perspectives, reconstituting a temporal history in a simultaneous space, using Felder's aptly-named musical composition, Box Man, based on a Japanese novel by Kobo Abe, rendering an updated extension of the laterna magica technology at Expo '67.

His most basic subject became the interaction or dialogue between electronic space and actual space and, more than any other contemporary video artist, he became involved in his own design and production of the physical tools—scan-processors, wave-form generators, multi-colorizers, multi-keyers, variable clocks, line-locked strobes, video sequencers—which structured the image, and with the conceptualization and construction of machines to exhibit them in new ways, as the photographs of the exhibition of his and Steina's work at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo illustrate. It was called "Machine Vision" as a Schilling exhibit was called "Seeing Machines."

Exhibition of the video works of Woody and Steina Vasulka, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York
Woody Vasulka’s *The Burrow* at Media Study / Buffalo.

At the same time that he explored the surface of the image, Vasulka remained interested in the portrait of introspective or psychological space and in the use of electronically-generated space to present a completely transformed kind of dramatic narrative. His Art of Memory (1971) was based on a book by Frances Yates, which I had given him. It is a study of how medieval and renaissance orators, following a classical tradition, constructed imaginary architectural spaces, with which they could associate parts of their speeches, so that, as they “walked through” the various sectors of a spatial arena, they were able to read aloud order of their speeches. By then, I had heard of Jan Amos Comenius, whom she mentions: “One of the preoccupations of the seventeenth century was the search for a universal language … Comenius worked in this direction in his *Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 378). Vasulka created a mental landscape, based on his own reading and recollection, growing up, of the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, the Pacific Theater in World War II, and the coming of the atomic era, using his computer tools to give the 2-D documentary film footage of those events an “internal” quality of 3-D. In fact, he really never ceased exploring how to “represent a story” and once, in the film studio of Media Study/Buffalo, he directed a version of Kafka’s short story, *The Burrow*, which included a narrator and a dancer depicting the mole, moving in a space in which slides of lymphatine images were simultaneously projected on three walls. He now lives in Santa Fe and continually travels to Japan, Australia, Europe, and Latin America to exhibit his work and expound his theories.

It was under that influence that I myself began to design a work which would become an objective correlative for the impact which the reading and re-reading of Kafka’s work had made on me over the years. I made a careful selection of passages which Kafka had written in his letters, parables, notebooks, essays, and fictional works, all involving the images of windows and doors which seemed critical to the anxiety of his work, those surfaces of exclusions and of potential—always potential—entrances. In his *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 6, for example, one of his very first tales, “Shamefaced Lanky and Impotent Ben,” reveals a letter which he wrote to his brother Siegfried from New York:

*Shamefaced Lanky had crept off to hide his face in an old village, among low houses and narrow lanes. The lanes were so small that whenever two people walked together they had to rub against each other friendly-neighborly like, and the rooms were so low that when Shamefaced Lanky stood up from his stool his big angular head went right through the ceiling, and without his particularly wanting to he had to look down on the thatched roofs.*

One day before Christmas Lanky stopped at the window. There was no room for his legs inside so he’d stuck them out of the window for comfort; there they dangled pleasantly.

And these images even infested his dreams. In 1922, a few years before he died, he wrote to Max Brod: “Last night I dreamed of you, all sorts of things of which only one bit remains, that you looked out of a window, shockingly thin, your face an exact triangle” (p. 352). My concept was to mix this verbal “documentary” material which flowed through Kafka’s imagination into the pen in his hand with documentary images of the doors and windows of the house in Prague in which he actually lived, having Vasulka record these largely vertical surfaces within the horizontal video frame, squeezed like Shamefaced Lanky and Max Brod, and then use all of his processing techniques to manipulate them into a musical piece which would be neither oratorio nor hallelujah, but some sort of “new music” which would embody Kafka’s statement: “Man may embody truth, but he cannot know it.” Following our appearance at Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria, in September 8-14, 1990, I plan to accompany Woody Vasulka to Prague, where he has been invited to talk about his research at his old school, FAMU, now that “the gentle revolution” has been accomplished, so that we can begin our first sketches for my Kafka project. There is the doorway to life at No. 1/21 corner of Maiselgasse and Karpenngasse, where he was born on July 3, 1883 and the doorway to death in the Jewish cemetery at Prague-Strašnice where was buried on June 11, 1924 (he died on June 3), and all of the windows and walls, doors and deadends in the temporal space intervening, the entrances and exits through which he struttered, stuttered—and shuddered—in and out of actuality. It was in his 1990 interview with Antonín J. Liehm (*The Politics of Culture* [New York: Grove Press, 1973], p. 378) that Václav Havel confesses that it was an early gulf between his privileged existence and that of village kids that it was an early gulf between his privileged existence and that of village kids that h...
An Encounter of Geniuses

Harper's Monthly

in the salon of Hugh McGregor-Fitzpatrick reviews was Antonin Dvorak's patron. Mrs. Thurber was also responsible for the first—albeit promised to unity—their forces, their dreams, their genius and their energy to lay the artist Steele MacKaye, recently and sadly deceased. It was an encounter that visual drama into a unity. It achieved this remarkable effect by using the voice of a idea of the Spectatorium, since the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show blended kinetic and thus, through a daring piece of casting by the director, Steele MacKaye, a unity Defeats General Custer, in which the title role was played by Sitting Bull in persona, Man, and so on until these seven tableaux, A Cyclone Is Born and Unleashes Its Fury which was entitled The Primeval Forest of America before its Discovery by the White MacKaye was the director. The effect of actuality wedded to poetic vision was heightened by various ingenious

Grasping the great composer by the lapels, Steele MacKaye unfolded his vision to the astonished genius. In his Spectatorium, the dramatis personae would neither 

It was in Buffalo, again through Vasulka, that I met Petr Kotik, about whom Václav Havel writes in Disturbing the Peace. "In some music, there was the influential group called The New Music (Kopolent, Kamorous, Kotik)...." (p. 50). Kotik was born in Prague where he studied flute and composition, and founded the ensemble, Musica Viva Pragensis, in 1951 and the QUAX Ensemble in 1966. In November, 1969, my Buffalo colleagues Lejaren Hiller and Lucas Foss, invited him to join the Creative Associates at the University and, three months later, I had established the S.E.M. Ensemble in Buffalo, an acronym which has no meaning in itself. While in Buffalo, he absorbed and expanded on the aesthetic of John Cage and Morton Feldman, and his compositions, annually performed at the Albright Knox Art Gallery there before touring over the world, included Many Many Women (1968) for six voices and instruments on a text by Gertrude Stein and Explorations in the Geometry of Thinking (1982), a four-hour work on a text by R. Buckminster Fuller. When he went to New York in 1979, I used Media Study/Buffalo, the institution which I had established to support independent artists in media and music, as a conduit for his grants. The S.E.M. Ensemble's European Tour earlier this year (May 2-14, 1990) included his musical composition of Václav Havel's Letter to Olga, and in 1979, his group had performed an undergraduate concert in Prague for the Musician's Union's Jazz Section.

When my friend Miles Glaser from Houston meet Petr Kotik in New York for the first time on June 10, 1990 at a dinner for Olga Havel at the home of William H. Luens, formerly the American Ambassador to Czechoslovakia and now President of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in connection with the opening of "The Banned and the Beautiful," Kotik mentioned that he had a film in his attic containing footage of the Russian invasion of Prague in the summer of 1968, and when Glaser called me the next day, we speculated that it might be a print of Oratorio for Prague. At my constant urging, Kotik looked deeper and deeper into his storage space and sent the film, which he had not seen for 20 years, to me in Buffalo. It turned out to be Prague: The Summer of Tans, which Pavel Fierlinger had edited. It was a subtle, Dark Days, a translation of Cierre Dnc, and was 30 minutes long. All of its narration, which is translated into English subtitles, consists of broadcasts transmitted by Czech radio during events shown on the screen, and after the closing of the Radio Building at 7:30 A.M. on the day of the invasion, materials transmitted from clandestine stations during the days that followed. It was filmed in Ciera, Bratislava, Prague, and Trencon, and covers events from August 3 through August 27, counterpointing the visual depiction of the invasion by helicopters, trucks, and tankers of darkness. Despite that, I think about the darkness, which without doubt awaits us, does not necessarily have to last twenty years. It depends really only on us, on our endurance, our belief, our fortitude.

There follows a long, endless tracking shot of Russian tanks, followed by a shot, taken from the distance, of the tops of the castle of Prague.

When I called Fierlinger's office to tell him that I had just seen the film he had edited 22 years ago, he was astonished. He told me that it was the last print of that film still in existence. It was his own personal print, which he had been unable to recover years earlier after loaning it to a Czech friend who died suddenly. The production company, Universal Education and Visual Arts, had gone out of business long ago, and the film had ceased being distributed. He identified the prescient radio announcer as Silava Volny.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 24, 1990

S.E.M. ENSEMBLE EUROPEAN TOUR MAY 2 - MAY 14, 1990

S.E.M. ENSEMBLE

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S.E.M. ENSEMBLE EUROPEAN TOUR MAY 2 - MAY 14, 1990
THE HOUSTON POST
Wednesday, November 13, 1968

Jan Nemec, Warhol Due At Colleges

Czech film director Jan Nemec, whose "Oratorio for Prague" was the hit of the recent New York Film Festival, will show at the festival another film "Report on the Party and the Guest," at Saint Thomas University's 5 PM Friday.

"Oratorio" was produced by a Czech-born businessman living in Houston, Miles Glazer.

The program will be accompanied by Andy Warhol, Roberto Rossellini, Milan Vaclavik, Scott Bartlett and Al and David Maguire at Saint Thomas and Rice Universities soon.

Warhol comes to appear at the opening of the Jamison-Macagg Collection at Saint Thomas Nov 20 and to screen his "Commemorative Cow- boy" in the Rice Memorial Center at 9 PM Nov 19. It is his first appearance with a film since he was here this summer.

Rossellini, who will screen a 45-minute digest of his epic "Survival" in Jones Hall Nov 21, will show his 1966 "Paisan." 9 PM Nov 22 at Saint Thomas in Weiler Hall.

Bartlett appears at Rice Dec. 4 to screen early films, "Metropolitan" and "Off-On." It is a new work, "A Trip To The Moon" last Friday.

All these viewings are headed under "The Film Revolution" and lasting 40 minutes.

At Colleges

THE PROGRAM joins appearance at Rice Dec. 4 to screen early films, "Metropolitan" and "Off-On." It is a new work, "A Trip To The Moon" last Friday.

The film which Rossellini showed was called Man's Survival, and its intended audience were the inhabitants of underdeveloped nations, to be reached by television. Eleven years later, in 1979, the Public Theater, then supported by John de Menil's son Francois, in association with the FDM Foundation for the Arts and the Rice University, is preparing a film which will be screened in the Rice Memorial Center at 9 PM Nov 19. It is his first appearance with a film since he was here this summer.

Scott Bartlett
— photograph by Robert Haller

When Jan Nemec showed Oratorio for Prague in Houston on November 15, 1968, it was in a series called "The Film Revolution," which included the first public appearance of Andy Warhol since the shooting; Scott Bartlett, the bright young American experimentalist from San Francisco who, with Tom Dewitt, was blending film and video together for the first time in works like Off-On, and Roberto Rossellini in that week, I met both Nemec and Rossellini for the first time. It was presented as a benefit for the Institute of International Education for which John de Menil had served as Chairman of the Board of Directors for eight years. The film which Rossellini showed was called Man’s Survival, and its intended audience were the inhabitants of underdeveloped nations, to be reached by television. Eleven years later, in 1979, the Public Theater, then supported by John de Menil’s son Francois, added me to prepare a tabloid, like this one for "The Banned and the Beautiful," for a retrospective on Rossellini, and his daughter Isabella gave us permission to publish the first and only American translation of the last essay that he ever wrote: "Reflections and Deliberations on Scientific Data to Attempt to Devise an Accessible Form of Integral Education." It is not so well known that Rossellini administered the Italian film school, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, in Rome. One of the fathers of neo-realism in the 1940’s, he was the first major director to turn from film to television, and his vision that television could be used to educate all of humankind and help it survive, was listened to and supported by the Schlumberger Corporation, and the non-profit foundation to fund it, Horizons Two Thousand, was licensed in Houston, Texas by John de Menil, then the chief executive of that French company, and my own patron in establishing the Media Center.

In his essay, which I now read for the first time, Rossellini said that his own theory of education was based on that of Comenius, of whom, to my embarrassment, I had never heard.

We must, as Comenius says, “find the way through which anything worthy of being known can be easily instilled in the mind” (I prefer to say acquired by the mind). Is it possible to find a concise method capable of teaching everyone everything? Comenius, again, says that “the difficulty in learning derives from the fact that things are not taught the students by direct vision but with extremely boring descriptions by means of which it will be very difficult for the images of the things to impress themselves into the intellect; and they stick so feebly to memory that they will easily be forgotten or be interpreted in various ways.”

The remedy, still according to Comenius, will be to offer all things we need to teach, effortlessly, everything to everyone.

As we have seen in running through the stages of his life, Comenius constantly sought, with direct relation to his “pansopic” ideal, to lay the foundations for that co-operation which was at least as close to his heart as his ideal of teaching. He must therefore be regarded as a great forerunner of modern attempts at international collaboration in the field of education, science, and culture. (John Amos Comenius on Education (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967), pp. 28-29.)

Americans other than myself, I should hasten to add, had not always been ignorant of Comenius. In 1892, on the occasion of the bicentenary of his birth, Nicholas Murray Butler, the President of the Columbia University where Frantisek Daniel and Milos Forman would establish their film school eighty-seven years later, wrote The Place of Comenius in the History of Education (Syracuse, New York: 1892), and said:

The place of Comenius in the history of education is one of commanding importance. He introduces and dominates the whole modern movement in the field of elementary and secondary education. His relation to our present teaching is similar to that held by Copernicus and Newton toward modern science and Bacon and Descartes toward modern philosophy (p. 7).

May 1-20, 1979

Presented at the Public Theater by Joseph Papp in association with the FDM Foundation for the Arts
Chapter XXXII
Of The Universal and Perfect Order of Instruction


1. We have now spoken at length on the necessity of reforming schools and on the methods by which this reformation can be effected. It will not be amiss if we give a brief summary of our ideals and of the means we have proposed for this realization.

2. Our desire is that the art of teaching be brought to such perfection that there will be as much difference between the old system and the new, as there is between the old method of multiplying books by the pen and the new method introduced by the printing-press. To say this, the facts, though the form, costly, and complicated, can reproduce books with greater speed, accuracy, and artistic effect, was formerly possible; and, in the same way, my new method, though its difficulties may be somewhat alarming at first, will produce a greater number of scholars and will give them a better education as well as more pleasure in the process of acquiring it, than did the old lack of method.

3. It is easy to imagine how impracticable the first attempts of the inventor of printing were. Compared with the simple use of the pen, the event showed of what great use the invention was. For, firstly, by means of a printing-machine two youths can now produce more copies of a book than could have been written by two hundred in the same time.

4. Similar results might be obtained if this new and comprehensive method of teaching were properly organized (for as yet the universal method exists only in expectation and not in reality), since (1) a smaller number of masters would be able to teach a greater number of pupils than under the present system. (2) These pupils would be more thoroughly taught; (3) and the process would be refined and pleasant. (4) The system is equally efficacious with stupid and backward boys. (5) Even masters who have no natural aptitude for teaching would be able to use it with advantage; since they will not have to select their own subject-matter and work out their own method, but will only have to take subject-matter that has already been suitably arranged and for the teaching of which suitable appliances have been provided, and to pour it into their pupils.

5. An organist can read any piece of music from his notes, though he might not be able to compose it or to sing it or play it from memory; and a school-master, in the same way, should be able to teach anything, if he have before his eyes the subject-matter and the method by which it should be taught.

6. Pursuing this analogy to the art of printing, we will show, by a more detailed comparison, the true nature of this new method of our school. Since it will thus be made evident that knowledge can be impressed on the mind, in the same way as on the paper, the setting up and inking of the type, the correction of the proof, and the impression and drying of the copies. All this must be carried out in accord with certain definite rules, the observance of which will ensure a successful result.

7. In didachography (to retain this term) the same elements are present. Instead of paper, we have pupils whose minds have to be impressed with the symbols of knowledge. Instead of type, we have the class-books and the rest of the apparatus devised to facilitate the operation of teaching. The ink is replaced by the voice of the master, since this is that conveys information from the books to the minds of the listener, while the press is school discipline, which keeps the pupils up to their work and compels them to learn.

The natural knowledge of newly born babies is to eat, drink, sleep, digest, and grow. However, they do not think about or understand these things. In the second or third year they first begin to consider what papa is, what mama is, what a cow is, what a dog is, what a cat is, what a stone is, what sand is, what clay is, what a tree is, what a branch is, what a fruit is, what a blossom is, what the common fruits are, and similar things. This knowledge their nurses will instill into them when caressing them in their arms, or carrying about, by saying, "Look! There is a horse, there is a bird, there is a cat." Latter, they can progress in further knowledge of natural things so as to be able to tell what a stone is, what sand, what clay, what a tree, a branch, a leaf, a blossom; what the common fruits are; and similar things. Also they will learn to call by their correct names the outer members of the body and in some measures to know their uses. To help them learn, their parents or bearers may often show them this or that and ask them to name it, saying for example: "What is this?" "The ear." "What do you do with it?" "You hear." "And this, what is it?" "The eye." "For what use is it?" "That I may see." The beginning of Optics will be to look up at the light, a thing natural to children, for the instant it becomes visible their eyes turn to it. They must however be watched, especially at first, and not allowed to stare at bright light lest the new and tender sight be weakened or put out. Begin by letting them look at moderate light, especially of a green color, and gradually anything that shines. The optical exercises of the second and third years will be to present to their study colored and pictured objects; to show them the beauty of the heavens, of trees, of flowers, and flowing waters; to bind corals to their hands and neck; and to supply them with beautiful dress, for they delight in looking at these things. Indeed, the sight of the eye and acuteness of the mind are stimulated even by looking in a mirror.

In the following years many things ought to be added to optics. Occasionally children will be taken to an orchard, a field, or a river that they may look upon animals, trees, plants, flowers, running waters, turning windmills, and similar things. Also, pictures of these in books and on the walls please them. So they ought not to be denied; rather, one ought to take pains to provide and point out such things to them.
That brave old man, Johannes Amos Comenius, the fame of whose worth hath been humpertumed as far more than three languages (whereof everyone is indebted unto his Janua could carry it, was indeed a globetrotter, by our Mr. Winthrop in his travels through the low countries, to come over into New England and illuminate this Colledge [i.e., Harvard] and country in the quality of a President. But the solicitations of the Swedish Ambassador, diverting him another way, that incomparable Moravian became not an American.--Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana (New Haven, 1820), II, iv, 10.

Harvard College was founded in 1636 and opened in 1642. Mr. John Winthrop Jr., the son of the Governor of Massachusetts and later himself the Governor of Connecticut, who was in England in 1642 where he met and began a correspondence with Comenius, tried to recruit him to be the first President of what is now Harvard University.

In 1947, I discovered that Roberto Rossellini had planned to make a film on Comenius—see my letter of October 12 to Mr. André Misk. Otakar Vavra, who had made films on natural themes, like the monumental Hussite Trilogy (1954-57), based on a novel by Alois Jirasek, had UNESCO support to make The Peregrinations of Jan Comenius (1964) based on a play by Oskar Kokoschka. BarabAs, himself appropriately in exile, made filmson naturalthemes, like the monumental Hussite Trilogy (1954-57), based on a novel by Alois Jirasek, had UNESCO support to make The Peregrinations of Jan Comenius—see my letter of October 12 to Mr. André Misk. Otakar Vavra, who had...

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Comenius in Rembrandt's Studio, 1942, pen and ink drawing.

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Given these contexts of Comenius and McLuhan, it was not without interest to me that Ash’s account of events in Prague in November, 1989 in *The Magic Lantern* began with his being interviewed by a video-camera team for the samizdat Videojournal (p. 7). And that, later, he reported: “Both externally and internally the crucial medium was television. In Europe, at the end of the twentieth century all revolutions are televolutions” (p. 94). In his interview with Philip Roth, “A Conversation in Prague” (New York Review of Books, April 12, 1990), the writer Ivo Klima referred to a memorandum in which a task force had outlined a position on television, which he had signed as President of the Czech PEN club:

Television, owing to its widespread influence, is directly able to contribute to the greatest extent towards a moral revival. This of course presupposes . . . opening up a new stage area not only in an organizational sense, but in the sense of the moral and creative responsibility of the institutions as a whole and every single one of its staff, especially its leading members. The times we are living through offer our television a unique chance to try for something that does not exist elsewhere in the world.

It seems clear that, like almost all his other critics, Czechoslavica’s Ján Smok, one of Woody Vasulka’s former teachers, had badly misread the work of Marshall McLuhan in his essay, “Marshall McLuhan: theories of television” (Theory of Communication and Television) in the June, 1969 Film a Doba. He focussed on only the technical aspects of McLuhan’s book, discussed three separate technologies—the photochemical, the thermoplastic, and the electromagnet—and wrote that McLuhan’s theories were without social impact, not realizing that Understanding Media: Extensions of Man was itself a magic lantern of sorts. After seven introductory chapters, a magic number, McLuhan divided that book into 26 chapters, metaphorically indicating that more complex media were replacing the letters of the print world’s alphabet. McLuhan extended the word media beyond print, radio, and television to include clothes, roads, automobiles, money, and, most importantly, games. In fact, Chapter 24, ‘Marking the spot’, is Games and it is itself subtitled, “Extensions of Man.”

There, McLuhan argued that games are extensions of social man and the body politic, just as all technologies are extensions of our physical bodies. He saw games as dramatic models of our psychological lives, as collective and popular art forms with strict conventions, and as rituals and myths which both represented and revealed the patterns of our culture. “Like our vernacular tongues, all games are media of interpersonal communication, and they could have neither existence nor meaning except as extensions of our inner lives” (Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man [New York: McGraw Hill, 1964], p. 210). To cite but one example, that of televising games themselves, while 80 million Americans watch the Superbowl and major college football bowl games, and pursues the fates and fortunes of their teams with an intellectual and emotional intensity unequalled in almost any other phase of their lives (the same applies to soccer, e.g., in other countries), we do not yet possess forms of analysis and models of interpretation which allow us to begin to understand what is happening when these teams represent the two great corporate bodies of our culture, the city and the university, and are sponsored by a third, corporate business, and amplified by a fourth, the corporate media which all this is happening in. McLuhan pervasively involving drama of communal and corporate interdependence that, from the beginning of time, has developed parallel to our narratives and dramas about individual heroes and heroines. One night in the Houston Astrodome would prove the point. Its architect told me that he designed it on the model of “the jazzy interaction of the pinball machine.”

When the students at Tienannam Square, armed with fax machines and cellular phones build a paper maché Statue of Liberty, and the students of Prague, armed with “cycolatedy or computer-printed flysheets” (The Magic Lantern, p. 84) and chanting “Live transmission!” in Wenceslas Square (p. 91), sing the Czech version of “We shall overcome” (p. 80), we are no longer dealing simply with Hasidic Hasid, who was at once director, playwright, stage manager, and leading actor in this, his greatest play” (p. 79), but with corporate international mythologies which seize upon, as it happens in these cases, two primary symbols (one visual, one auditory). American cultural identity and launch an appeal for an solidarity that implodes and shatters local politics with a power that calls for an entirely new kind of analysis by the political historian. In mid-July, 1989, an editorial in the Wall Street Journal advised the Chinese government:

China’s leadership might want to look at their situation from the perspective of a group many times larger than that massed in Tienannam Square, which is to say all the world’s people who’ve been watching on television and reading long accounts these days in their newspapers. It is likely that the Chinese people have never in their history received from the world as much admiration and good will toward China, as the students at Tienannam Square. These images and stories have created an extraordinary wave of good will toward China.

There now needs to be a deeper analysis of what Timothy Garton Ash so brilliantly describes. Ash is currently a fellow at St. Antony’s College, Oxford which I myself attended as a Marshall Scholar from 1958-1961. I was then a member of a college of 70 people from 50 different countries, almost all of whom were studying history and politics. While the three years were packed with novel experiences, the most memorable event took place on the night of my arrival in the fall of 1958, just 10 years before the storming of Oranienburg. In Houston. About ten o’clock, the late Max Hayward crossed the hall and gave me a welcoming present: “Here is a book which I translated in your country.” He had just returned from Harvard, and he gave me the galley proofs of Boris Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago, its pages congested like a long megalith. I read it continuously for the rest of two days and nights. Its hero, Doctor “Life,” was a medical doctor specializing in gynecology and perception, later a father bringing forth life from the soil, and a poet, the guardian of spiritual life; and, in the course of the novel, he married and generated the Doctor’s, merging the personae of the artist and the hero in a new and profound way. By then, the character, Doctor Zhivago, has died, and, in the last paragraphs of the novel, his friends are remembering him by reading his book of poems, and join them in remembering Pasternak. In the penultimate poem of the collection, they write:

Life rafts down a river, like a convoy of barges, The centaur will float to me out of the darkness.

It was almost thirty years later, in 1987, that I read Arthur Miller’s autobiography, *Timebends*, and his two short plays, *Danger: Memory!*, and wrote him a letter which I quote in part.

As I write, I have Inge’s photograph of Pasternak’s grave over my desk; the title of his novel, Doctor Zhivago remembered his first book of poems, *My Sister, Life*, published in 1917, and I called his own life story *I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography* — and Nabokov called his, *Speak Memory: an Autobiography Revisited*. I recently came across the writings of L.S. Vygotsky, who separates natural memory from social memory and makes clear the function of memory in culture.

The use of notched sticks and knots, the beginnings of writing and simple memory aids all demonstrate that even at early stages of historical development humans went beyond the limits of their psychological functions given them by nature and proceeded to a new culturally elaborated organization of behavior. Comparative analysis shows that such activity is absent in even the highest species of animals . . . The very essence of human memory consists in the fact that human beings actively interact with the help of signs . . . It has been remarked that the very essence of civilization consists of purposely building monuments so as not to forget. In both the knot and the monument we have manifestations of the most fundamental and characteristic feature distinguishing human from animal memory. [Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 39, 51 — G.O.G.]
In my studies at St. Anthony's College, which was my first experience with professional medievalism, my main observation was that history was seldom contextualized. I had a glimmering of what Clifford Geertz would later call "thick structures." Even so fine a book as Geoffrey Barraclough's *An Introduction to Contemporary History* did not pay attention to the way events were being newly perceived by minds transformed by the disappearance of God, the massage of many technologies, and the cultural commentary provided by the traditional arts, the news media, and popular culture. To simply comment on the last, events were reconstituted in an age of newspaper previews, reviews and interviews, and how millions of people thought such events were being transacted was as much of a fact, and an important one, as the fact of the event itself. Film, not to mention television, was not an accepted academic discipline at Oxford College, and I must admit that I myself, raised in Saturday afternoon horse operas involving singing cowboys, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Hopalong Cassidy, and their horses, Champion, Trigger, and Topper had never attended another movie during my undergraduate and graduate education.

It was my fellow students from Eastern Europe, Zsigaev Nader from Poland, Georgi Gomori from Hungary, Kristov Cvić from Yugoslavia, and Jan Darvos of Czechoslovakia, who first drew my attention to the cultural importance of film, that, coupled with the extraordinary development of international cinema during that period when Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini, Resnais, and Godard made their first classics. Even as we discussed and debated the cultural implications of these films far into the night and went back to see them a second and third—and fourth—and fifth time, I was entirely unaware that my own cultural habits were being shattered and reconstituted. By 1973, a decade later, when I addressed the Director and Heads of Departments at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to open their doors to television and host the first international study conference on television as an art form, called "Open Circuits: The Future of Television," I was able to describe what had happened.

My own life has undergone a transformation. I was trained as a medievalist, and I have now dropped the "evil" part and spend most of my time, my ecumena, in media. I was then engaged in a long study of patroic thought from the year 1 A.D. to 1500, centering on the concept of penance or individual psychological reformation which the Greek fathers expressed by the word metanoia, literally "to change one's mind," and I was attempting to relate the impact of that kind of personal religious force to social and institutional reformations as encoded by the transformation of the late medieval imagination in those works of art known as dream vision allegories—Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, and the great English social epic, *The Visions of Will Concerning Piers the Plowman*, which represents the journey of a soul through a confrontation with each of the aspects of its own mind—Memory, Conscience, Intellect, and Will—against the background of the black plague, the burnings, and assassinations of the period, and the complete loss of faith in contemporary institutions and leadership, an age much like our own, except that the Peasant's Revolt, then localized, is now globalized. Our vision is not that swords will be beaten into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4) but into television antennas, as we move from fields of wheat to fields of electricity, from an agriculture to an undreamt informationsociety.

I am here this afternoon because those same trio of forces—the personal, the social, their imaginative fusion in art and technology—engage me in the new dream allegories, the tele-visions which you have seen this afternoon. Valery wrote, "The deeper education consists in unlearning one's first education." (Gerald O'Grady, "Sound-Track for a Tele-Vision," in Douglas Davis & Alison Simmons, eds., *The New Television: A Public/Private Art* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977], p. 229)

St. Antony's College, unplanned by everyone and understood by no one at the time, had provided an environment that began to allow media to penetrate history. Jerome Kuehl, who had, like myself, come to Oxford from the University of Wisconsin, where McLuhan, incidentally, began his teaching career, and was then studying Ditlhey, became chief writer and researcher for Thames Television's *The World at War*. A British student, Paul Smith, became a teacher at King's College London and edited *The Historian and Film* in 1976, showing that film, in its manifold forms, is the newsfeed to the feature, was a major source of evidence and of interpretation for contemporary history. A few years later, Pierre Sorlin, a Professor at the University of Paris, became a Visiting Lecturer at St. Antony's College and wrote *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (1980) arguing that films were a legitimate source of documentary evidence and a living archive for the social historian. Earlier yet, in 1971, seven years after I left, Anthony Smith, later the Director of the British Film Institute, wrote *The Shadow in the Cave*, a history of broadcasting policy, while a Fellow at St. Anthony's and has since gone on to produce *Goodbye Gutenberg: The Newspaper Revolution of the 1980's* (1980) and *The Geopolitics of Information, Television and Political Life* (1979), as well as *Social Change, Social Theory, and Historical Processes* (1982). He is now Master of Magdalen College, Oxford. My own journey was part of a larger transformation of an obsolete educational system.

My own interest in film centered on the "history" of the individual, that is, on autobiography. As autobiography requires the reflexive stance or, more properly, flow, of this essay, the subject had become the interactive process of how the "I" was mediated through all the codes of consciousness, all those elements of the man-made environment which McLuhan had begun to elaborate. In an interview in which James Blue did on his Ford Foundation Grant in 1965, Cesare Zavattini, a *cineasta* who had, like myself, come to Oxford from the University of Magdalen College, Oxford. My own journey was part of a larger transformation of an obsolete educational system.

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energy of ongoing movement magically restructures into a mosaic in mid-air. In his notes on Diaries, Mekas explained that while a written diary is composed in retrospect, in moments of recall at the end of the day, his camera diary was composed of instantaneous reactions to the realities before the camera: it has to register my state of feeling and all the memories as I react" (Gerald O'Grady, "Our Space in Our Time: the New American Cinema" in Donald E. Staples, ed., The American Cinema [Washington, D.C., 1974], p. 237).

In Diaries, there often appeared footage of New York's Central Park, covered with snow, and Mekas once told me that, unintentionally and unconsciously, he filmed these winter scenes because they reminded him of his childhood in Lithuania. He was documenting his own mind. On March 22-25, 1973, I convened the first meeting on that problem ever held in the history of film called "The Buffalo Conference on Autobiography in the New American Cinema," and showed the films of more than twenty artists.

It should not be thought that transformation has been either limited to or the result of film, video, and computer explorations. Rather, it was manifested in all of McLuhan's media or coded extensions of human consciousness. In 1932, Pablo Picasso painted his A Girl Before a Mirror, and the American art historian Clement Greenburg later wrote:

Picasso and other moderns have discovered for art the internality of the body... Thus, the body is represented outside and within, and in the mirror is still another image of the body. I think that this is a wonderful, magic, poetic idea, to show the human body which is ordinarily represented in one way—in its familiar surface form—as belonging to three different modes of experience within one picture. I don't know of another picture in all history that does that....

In his essay, "The Magic Mirror by Jackson Pollock" (The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era [New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1987]), Walter Hopps establishes the likelihood that Pollock knew this work before painting The Magic Mirror in 1941. Girl Before a Mirror was one of the most accessible and celebrated works of recent European modernism to be seen in New York at the end of the 1930's, and it is probably served as a stimulant rather than as a model for Pollock's work.

While his title suggests the presence of a figure before the mirror, his canvas superimposes three layers of crusty paint and fine gravel, and merges elements of three separate compositions, a result not pre-planned but worked out, on the fly, from streams of images developed in the process of painting, giving a freer expression, than any previous painter in history, to the atavistic and archetypal elements of his unconscious, a painting which still conceals as much as it richly reveals. One layer, at the top upper left of the composition, shows a radically abstracted head with a feathered headdress, prominently outlined in strokes of black, yellow, purple, and red, a surface somewhat like Bird (ca. 1938-41) and also prefiguring the imagery of a later painting, the Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle (ca. 1943); at the time, Pollock's images were full of correspondence with American Northwest Coast and Southwest Indian art. At the upper right-hand corner of the composition, there is an enclosed rectangular form, and the nature of its framing suggests that it may be a mirror which is revealing a complicated, ambiguous reflection. Hopps thinks that Pollock's psychic identification with his work introduced new degrees of both subjectivism and indeterminism into the process and says that, "...with him, gesture in painting came to signify a language of expressive graphology unique to the artist" (p. 218), and "if the entire canvas of The Magic Mirror may be likened to the surface of a mirror, by analogy its composition might be seen as a self-portrait of the artist, where the likeness is reflected as a subjective, psychic transformation" (p. 251). In relation to this, even Picasso's stunning morphological permutations reveal themselves to be highly-structured depictions. In Pollock, unlike Picasso, there is no clear separation between male and female identities, and The Magic Mirror is not so much a considered depiction of one individual subject from multiple perspectives as it is an expressive merging of many fluid identities which are changing in the moment of making.

One wonders whether Andy Warhol, when he came to do his own self-portraits in 1968, was aware of Pollock's painting. He used a basic iconicographic image, but articulated it in a variety of media—Self Portrait II (gelatin silver photographic prints, stitched with thread) and Camouflage Self-Portraits and Six Self-Portraits (silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas), the last being one of his repetitive serial images, each a different color—blue, green, yellow, light red, an image rendered with more photographic realism when he posed for Robert Mapplethorpe (also 1986). The image of the Indian simultaneously served several myths: that of the wild man, the free man; that of harmony with nature and birds; that of origins or primitive settler; and that of a future in which there would be a unity of all races, of all men. I have already touched on my meetings with two Czech "Reds" in a New York tepee and mentioned Dovrak's incorporation of the Indian into his symphony,
The Virgin in Majesty and The Founders of Notre Dame, Portal of Saint Anne, Cathedral of Notre Dame (c. 1165)

From the New World, and can also report that another Comenius’ basic books, the Janus linguarum reserato (1631) was used, at his urging, to teach Indians in the American colonies. It was a new kind of textbook for teaching grammar and included, together with conjugations and declensions, a miniature compendium of useful knowledge. In 1655, he wrote to his then patron, Andrew Klobusicky, a Magyar nobleman: “We hope about Whitsuntide to receive a full account of the progress of our class in America.” The whole story is told in Robert Fitzgibbon Young’s Comenius in England: The Visit of Jan Amos Komensky (Comenius) The Czech Philosopher and Educationalist to London in 1641-42; Its Bearing on the Origins of the Royal Society, on the Development of the Encyclopedia, and on the Plans for the Higher Education of the Indians of New England and Virginia (Oxford University Press, 1932). I cite these Czech interests here because it was Woody Vasulka who led me myself to discover the Indians in my own country and to engage me in all those myths I mentioned above.

On April 4-12, 1981, I had travelled to Paris for the first time to speak at a retrospective of the films of James Blue which I had organized for the Cinéma du Réel International Festival of Ethnographic and Sociological Films at the Centre Georges Pompidou, which was honoring him along with Nagisi Oshima and Jean Rouach. While the Pompidou was its own latema magica, I took the opportunity to spend every morning at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. I had spent thirty years of my life reading about the coming of the Gothic and the Biblical iconography in the stained glass windows and sculptural elements, and now, in the spring sun of Paris, it fulfilled all of the qualities of that latema magica for which I had long hoped. Back in Buffalo a few days later, I travelled to New Mexico to visit the Vasulkas, and went on location with them as they finished The West (1981), which has since been purchased by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The location was Chako Canyon, completely unknown to me and never mentioned in any of the textbooks on American history which I had read during all levels of my education. Here, in my own country, two centuries before Notre Dame had been constructed, the Anasazi, the Navaho word for “old one,” had erected buildings on the sides of mountains with religious meeting places (kivas) designed to allow the maximum entry of the sun, and having perfect acoustics, a natural latema magica. The Vasulkas placed their own magic mirror at the center of a kiva and set it rotating on its arms, and caught the reflections of images from all directions, later to be displayed as a multi-monitor environmental installation, which also included material from the VLA or Very Large Array, a field of radio telescopes which themselves rotate slowly to scan the sky, listening to the Moon. For me, the experience of these low, plain, simple houses and these enormous constructions of technology in a barren landscape was a religious one. Here were two technologies, centuries apart, whose principle of beauty was determined by use alone.

American reporters have been interested in Václav Havel’s religious experience, as the enclosed item from The New York Times of June 8, 1990 indicates. He had written profoundly about this experience in a letter to his wife on August 8, 1980:

David Snell would later report in The Smithsonian 2.5 (August 1971) that “it marked the first time in perhaps 400 years that a religious commission of this scope to a major artist had brought about such a degree of concurrence between art and architecture” (p. 49). The person who persuaded them to collect art, Marie-Alain Couturier, describes his own efforts to introduce contemporary art into religious edifices, notably Henri Matisse’ Stations of the Cross at the chapel in Venice, in his diary autobiography. La verité blessee (Paris: Plon, 1984). Rothko’s 14 huge dark monochromatic canvases were installed in an octagonal structure inspired by the floor of an 11th century basilica on the island of Torcello; in the Middle Ages, the number 8 stood for “the eighth day of the week, the resurrection, rebirth and apocalypse.”

Rothko completely broke with the traditional iconographical and representational concepts of the Divinity, and early critics found his brooding abstractions, drained of form, it seemed, and subdued in pigmentation, to be gloomy, and the chapel a place of “black, unbearable nothingness,” but Dominique de Menil responded:

I know that some people are distressed because they find them dark and they are the people who always associated darkness with something malign. These are paintings of silence, and you know it’s difficult for people to accept silence if they don’t like to be confronted with themselves. It is better perhaps to look at the paintings as the obscurity of God, the silence of God. I myself feel no anguish here at all, nor anything disturbing, distressing, or sad.

Rothko, wanting his paintings to be seen under the same kind of illumination he had made them in his studio, insisted that they be naturally lit by means of a skylight. Here, there, was the ultimate latema obscura of modern art, truly reflecting the cultural history of the terrible 20th century. It was the zenith of the reductive sublime. On the
Václav Havel's quest for 'the focus of all meaning,' a journey that has its own meaning.

Not long after his cause emerged victorious in Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel went to the Manhattan residence of John Cardinal O'Connor to receive an award from the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, a group concerned with religious freedom. While Mr. Havel met there privately with a number of New York's religious leaders, reporters milled about outside, trying to scrape together whatever they knew about Mr. Havel's religious beliefs.

Before monochromatic painting can function outside itself, as it does in the greater scheme of the chapel, it must hold its shape—i.e., work in itself—by stimulating and conducting eye movement up, down, and across the surface, so that the painting is not merely seen but continuously and vividly experienced. (The Menil Collection, p. 314).

On the other hand, the chapel which was open to all religious faiths and to non-believers and served as a sanctuary, a place for the presentation of classical and modern music, and a meeting place for scholarly colloquies directed to the spiritual and social concerns of mankind, was a black, magic box which encouraged each entrant to continuously confront, experience, and transform his or her own image, conscious and unconscious, and to move in and out of those atavistic and apocalyptic forces that spiritually unify all humans, including the dead and the unborn.

There had been still one more film made in that summer of 1968, in August in fact, and it presented still another variation on that search for a larger and fuller truth that I have been trying to document. Norman Mailer had conceived the heart of his movie, Maidstone, in the days right after the assassination of Robert Kennedy, in that year when he thought that the country would blow apart its Democratic and Republican presidential political conventions. The film would feature a famous film director, one of fifty men whom America, in her bewildered and profound desolation, would be thinking about as a possible President, and there would also be a group of secret police debating that director’s assassination. And here he added a new twist: the secret police thinking of his assassination would be empowered to film their plots without his knowledge. Just as the director was in his own film as an actor, so several actors in the film also served as directors as the story, various scenes shot simultaneously on three estates over a five day period, veered off in a dozen unexpected directions; these actor-directors were able to call on five camera/sound teams trained in shooting rock concerts. The cameras teams were sometimes interchangeable and they too were to be involved in that quest for a truer sense of what life is like, and since their lenses were the final mirrors for the recording of the activity, they themselves would be obliged to anticipate the actions of the non-actors. As Mailer noted, "...they were ready to be surprised. It stimulated that coordination between hand, eye, and camera balance which was the dynamic of their art, and..."

Mailer had praised Warhol’s talent for perceiving that in every home movie, there were moments of palpable being, but he also recognized the limitations of traditional cinéma vérité in which people played themselves in real situations and were therefore the opposite of actors. For him, instead of offering a well-structured lie which had the feel of dramatic truth, as in Hollywood fiction, they often gave off a sense of themselves which was a species of fact but come out flat and wooden like a lie. ‘It was as if there was a law,’ he said, ‘that a person could not be himself in front of a camera unless he pretended to be someone other than himself’ (p. 222). The editing was equally improvisational. When the director of the film (Norman Mailer) came to edit the footage of his non-actors playing roles, himself included in the role of Norman T. Kingsley, the film director with presidential potential and assassination possibility, he was again approaching the filmic material with the openness of life, since he had not seen much of the material which the other actors had conceived in their capacities as directors. He described the editing in this way: ‘...with improvisation and free cutting, the story was not obliged to be present as the walls and foundations of a movie, but rather became a house afloat on some curious stream, a melody perhaps on which many an improvisation was winging’ (p. 231).

Mailer did not see the camera as an object to be mastered, but rather as a partner in the creative process. In his words, ‘The camera is a tool, and the tool is not to be mastered, but to be used as a partner in the creative process.’

The principles of projection on which the magic lanterns were based, also three hundred years after Athanasius Kirchner, Comenius’ contemporary who also lived in Holland, had first formulated in his book, Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae (1657), the principles of projection on which the magic lanterns were based. Also three hundred years later, a Swedish director would appropriate that machine as the title for a commission he accepted to create a film in which the projection of a slide, from the window of the Rothko Chapel, would be used to create a visual effect similar to the one used by Comenius.

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Unlike Warhol, he engaged in extensive editing: ‘One can put anything next to anything in film — there is a correlativity in some psychic state of memory, in the dream, the déjà vu, or the death mask, in some blink of the eye or jump of the nerve’ (p. 228). Maidstone had been made as an imaginary event and a real event, and so was both a fiction and a documentary, and it became impossible to locate either. It had the flavor of R.D. Laing’s ear, here, err.

The film is a meditation on the relationship of science to religion, of technology to eschatology, and of the past to the future, and then, unable to sleep, he gets up and roams the house of his hosts, reporting his insomnic imaginings that he will be set adrift in a society that may feature “transplanted hearts monitored like spaceships— the patients might be obliged to live in a compound reminiscent of a Mission Control Center where technicians could monitor on consoles the beatings of a thousand transplanted hearts” (Norman Mailer, Of a Fire on the Moon [Boston: Little, Brown, 1969], p. 142), a fantasy not entirely unlike Jan Němec’s. The home in which he reports these dreams took place is identified earlier in the chapter as that of John and Dominique de Menil, and it should also be stated, as a matter of record, that John de Menil had appeared in Maidstone. (Mailer would later play Stanford White, the real-life architect of the original Madison Square Garden, in Miloš Forman’s film version of E.L. Doctorow’s fact-and-fiction novel, Ragtime.)

Houston, then, at that time, was a community engaged in heart transplantation, moon transportation, and was planning to house that site for the deeper transformation of the self, The Rothko Chapel. The Rothko Chapel opened in 1971, over three hundred years after Athanasius Kirchner, Comenius’ contemporary who also lived in Holland, had first formulated in his book, Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae (1657), the principles of projection on which the magic lanterns were based. Also three hundred years later, a Swedish director would appropriate that machine as the title for a biography which began with his first possession of one as a child: “Then I loaded the film... Then I turned the handle... I can’t find words to express my excitement... I can see the trembling rectangle on the wall” (Ingmar Bergman, The Magic Lantern, translated by Joan Tate [New York: Viking, 1988], p. 16).

Since Comenius, “the writing on the wall” in all its meanings, and I would not exclude the title of Antonin Lhien’s anthology of contemporary Czech literature (1983) as well as its more traditional significations, has come to mean the trembling rectangle on the screen or on our television tubes or on the walls of museums and chapels—as Comenius predicted and propagated for, this “writing” has become increasingly pictorial, and it is also reinforced and enhanced by the synchronized and separate channels and frequencies of electronic sound, and by the high-speed and condensed transmission of alphabetic text and numerical data. While Timothy Garton Ash’s The Magic Lantern describes an actual theater in downtown Prague in November, 1989, it also serves as a metaphor for that explosion of human identity and implosion of global solidarity which, according to Roberto Rossellini, building on Comenius, is our human hope. Unknown to me at that time, there was some “writing on the wall” in that November week in Houston in 1968 when the paths of Rossellini, Warhol, Jan Němec, and Scott Bartlett mysteriously crossed in my series called “the Film Revolution.”

Comenius: Frontispiece to Didactica Omnia, by Crispin de Pas

Roberto Rossellini
Scott Bartlett's A Trip to the Moon, that then young American's tribute to one of the magicians who founded French film, Georges Méliès, perhaps signified our mutual aspiration. The very last image that Andy Warhol made before his death was Moonwalk (History of TV Series) (1987). When he had reviewed the television coverage of the first moon landing in his Village Voice column in August, 1969, Jonas Mekas mentioned that it was filmed in Warhol-style cinéma vérité, and he added:

I should say here, in one brief sentence, what I think about the trip to the moon, since I keep hearing and reading all kinds of smart cracks about it. This is what I believe: Our trips into space are frozen art. The deeper man descends into himself spiritually, the farther he will fly materially, because both are the same, and the farther distance is proportional to the closest (deepest) inner distance. So that the only way to stop our space explorations is to begin to retrogress spiritually, and that's the easiest thing to do.

As time moved on, in my own mind's magic mirror, I imagined that the womb of the floor plan for the cathedral of "our lady" waited to give birth to that child, Apollo, which, in its awe-filled trajectory of the world, a "bird," as these projectiles and satellites are known, might provide a new perspective to all of humankind on the fluid mergings of science, technology, religion, art, and play, all extensions of the laternamagica of our individual consciousnesses, whose transformations create human history. This is simply my own way of remembering Ortega y Gasset's opening sentence of his essay, On Point of View in the Arts: "When history is what it should be, it is an elaboration of cinema . . . The true historical reality is not the datum, the fact, the thing, but the evolution formed when these materials melt and fluidly" (The Dehumanization of Art [Princeton University Press], 1968, p. 107).

I humbly dedicate this orbit pic to the memory of John de Menil, who not only supported the work of Rossellini and Warhol, but my own maiden voyage into the media galaxy. Miles Glaser, a Czech emigrant, a survivor of the concentration camps who had lost his family in them, as I would learn later, was unknown to us when he telephoned that day in November, 1968 and unwittingly became my co-programmer for "The Film Revolution." At the opening of The Menil Collection in Houston in 1987, I met his former wife, Zuzana Justman who, with Dan Weissman, had begun a documentary on the concentration camp for children at Terezin, based on interviews with survivors, the pre-war photographs, writings, drawings and artifacts from Terezin, and on footage from the film, Hitler Gives the Jews a City. Terezin Diary was completed in 1989, has already been shown at several international film festivals, and will be presented at Karllov Vary in July, on the same program with The Banned and the Beautiful, there called Elective Affinities. One of the academic advisors on the film was Martin Gilbert, who had been a student with me at St. Antony's College. I had quoted him in a recent review of Shoah which, because of its length, I had had to see on a Sunday morning in Buffalo. I sent the review to Zuzana Justman. I had written:

Each of us constructs a mental life by binding together our memories, what might be called a bio-religion. The word "religion" is related to "ligature" and literally means "to tie back," to connect, to splice, if you will. . . . When I went home, my memory merged with that of the woman in Wallace Stevens' Sunday Morning, which Yvor Winters called the greatest American poem of the twentieth century. It is a meditation on the annihilation of traditional religion, and the inconsolable encounter with death which each of us faces. It presents a world in which "the holy rush of ancient sacrifice" is dissipated and the tomb in Palestine has become a grave, nothing more. It concludes:

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they
Sink, Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

(The Reporter, University at Buffalo, 18, 4, September 25, 1986, p. 11).

These birds, "sinking downward to darkness" convey Wallace Stevens' analogue to The Rothko Chapel and Vaclav Havel's "common problem of civilization called Sunday." Arthur Miller, more than any other American playwright, had spent his career remembering dark places—the grave of Willy Loman, a man who had lost out to technology, in Death of a Salesman, and the concentration camps in his screenplay for Fania Feneon's memoirs, Playing for Time, and in his own plays, Incident at Vichy and After the Fall. The working title for the last, during its decade of gestation, was The Survivor.

Today, Miles Glaser is The Chief Financial Officer of The Menil Foundation. "The first installment is about 'what is a man.' We say that a man became a man when he started to remember and have ceremonies for the dead."

Roberto Rossellini to reporter Jeff Miller on the occasion of the screening of Man’s Survival (La Lotta dell’uomo per la sua sopravvivenza, 1967) — The Houston Chronicle, November 21, 1968.

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