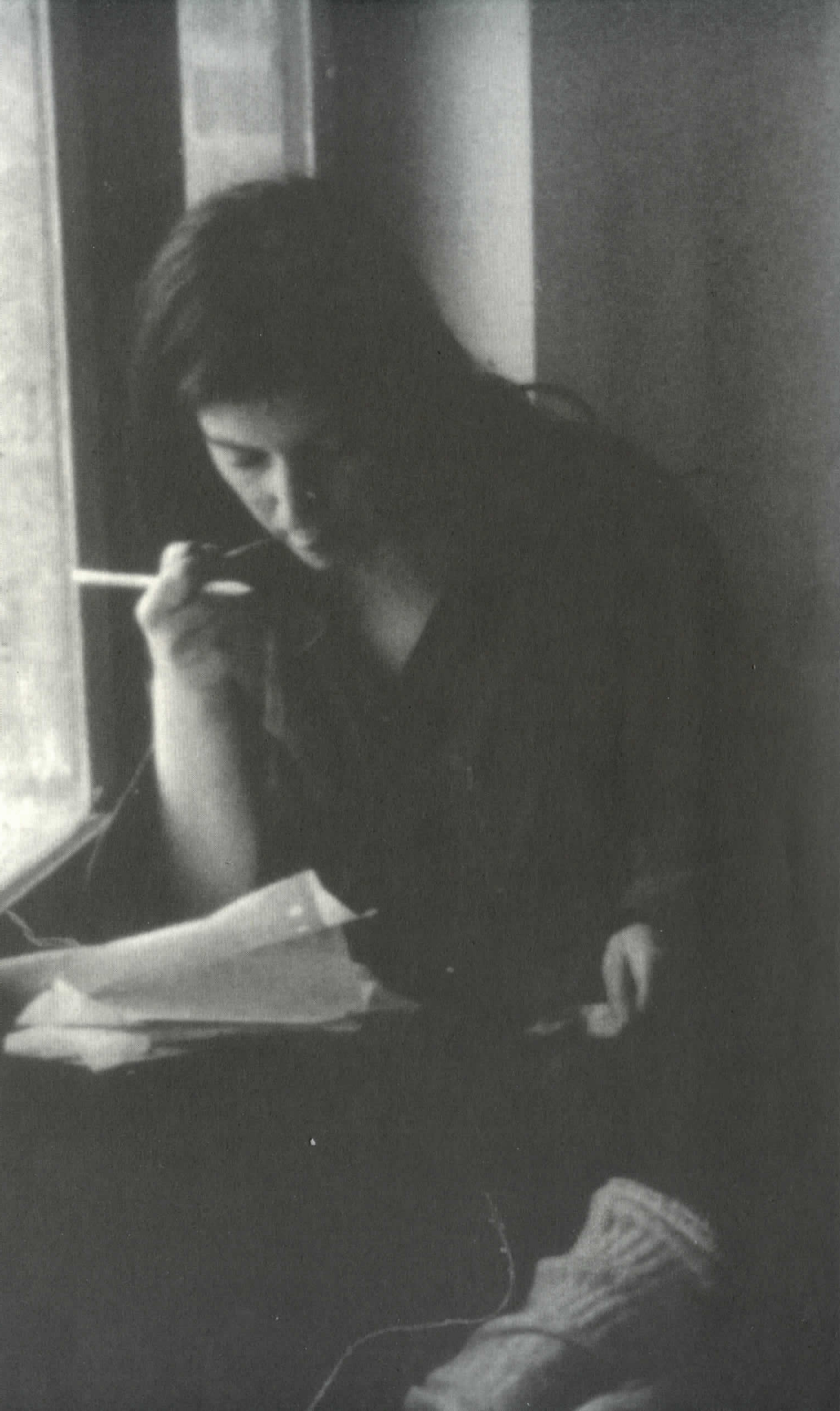

NOTHING HAPPENS

Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday

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ages already inscribed and I say that yes there are images already inscribed, and it is exactly *under* those that I work: over the inscribed image and the one I would love to inscribe."[61] *Nothing Happens* traces the shift from showing to inscribing—from the recording impulse of neorealist aesthetics to the subversive energy of Warhol's minimal/hyperrealist production of simulacra. Godard's modernist phenomenology is undoubtedly an important link in this shift, which reflects a move away from a belief in the anteriority of reality, a move toward representation. Indeed one need only think of Godard's fascination with Henry Fonda's face in Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* in the '50s, and of his pop sensibility in *Breathless* and *Alphaville* in the '60s, to note the cultural and historical shift that in the late '60s and '70s would lead to Akerman's and a few others' corporeal cinemas, where the neorealists' or direct cinema's romantic investment in reality is intercepted by the ineluctable knowledge of film's representational nature.

This double-layered cinema allows only inscription. It is not an idealist cinema; though utterly ascetic, it prizes materiality. In this cinema, in fact, the quality of presence wavers precisely *because* of its materiality, because of the excess produced in it by hyperbole and redundance. The radical figuration of this excess is the American experiment with real-time representation: Warhol's films are the signpost to a *corporeal cinema* in which the concreteness of both the filmic body and the bodies represented eludes the very Idea of Materiality. At the same time that text is perverted by tone, and that gesture is doubled by dialogue, the works of Rohmer, Dreyer, Bresson, and Akerman create an extramateriality, a surplus I call, for lack of a better term, "theatricality." The term emphasizes that this cinema works its principal effect on the ever fragile link between artifice and nature—the figure and body of the performer.

Akerman's contribution to this antinaturalistic corporeal cinema involves the blunt, unavoidable acknowledgment of a gendered body. A woman's gestures are simultaneously recognized and made strange. Our attention turns to a different pace, a different rhythm, and it remains for us to determine where this distinction lies. It is finally the dry intensity of bodies traversed by the mechanisms of cinema that moves me, and moves me toward the singularity proposed by Chantal Akerman's films.

1 NOTHING HAPPENS

Time for the Everyday in Postwar

Realist Cinema

Thus the most realistic of the arts shares the common lot . . . reality must inevitably elude it at some point.—André Bazin[1]

The everyday is platitude, . . . but this banality is also what is most important. It brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived . . . it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity.—Maurice Blanchot[2]

"Nothing happens": this definition of the everyday is often appended to films and literature in which the representation's substratum of content seems at variance with the duration accorded it. Too much celluloid, too many words, too much time, is devoted to "nothing of interest." The precariousness of this extremely relative definition is more than a matter of taste. If the word "boring" has little critical value, after World War II the phrase "Nothing happens" becomes increasingly charged with a substantive, polemical valence.

In the immediate postwar period in Europe, as social reality became a concrete experience of subsistence (as opposed to the more immediate life-or-death concerns of the war years), the everyday seemed a more-than-worthy subject. The quotidian of De Sica's or of Zavattini's neorealism, characterized by the discovery of heroism in anonymous, urban, lower-middle-class and white-collar protagonists, is, however, quite different from the quotidian of Rossellini's Louis XIV. And it also differs from the

quotidian distilled from the answers to the loaded existentialist query, "How happy are you with your life?"—the question that Rouch and Edgar Morin ask in the series of interviews in their *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960). My interest is in the way some filmmakers negotiate the link between the banal or quotidian and the political, and in the shifts in discursive ground that allow for such different approaches to everyday life. Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,* of course, figures as a major text in any consideration of the modernist approach to the quotidian. The label "Nothing happens," often applied to Akerman's work, is key in defining that work's specificity—its equation of extension and intensity, of description and drama.

The inscription of subject matter neglected in traditional film tends to involve a corrective thrust, a setting straight of the image bank: if conventional cinema contains too few positive images of women and ethnic or other minority groups, it becomes the realist filmmaker's task to represent these groups. The inclusion of such "images between images" begets a spatio-temporal, as well as moral expansion of cinema.

The interest in extending the representation of reality reflects a desire to restore a phenomenological integrity to reality, or to dig up some covert causal or psychological motivational structure. Haunting the interest in a repressed or unrepresented reality is the idea of a hidden totality. It seems intrinsic to the "corrective thrust" of realism, then, that the effort should fall prey to a form of essentialism. Realist films entail more than a "documentary" record of reality; as we analyze them, it becomes clear that they seek adequacy in two main functions: first, to act as visual, aural analogies with perceptual reality, and second, to fulfill a notion of representativeness.

This second notion (addressed in my discussion of type in chapters 4 and 5) relates most directly to the prescription that any event or character presented will have a social dimension. The requirement complicates matters interestingly in confronting the inevitable reduction implicit in any filmic representation: how is one to represent a general idea, collectivity, or moral through the always indexical and particularizing powers of image and sound? This question (theoretically and practically addressed by Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and expressionist and *cinema nôvo* filmmakers, among others) becomes especially pertinent when the director wants to avoid making association and symbolic leaps, and to fend off an impulse toward allegory—as in, for example, the version of realism represented by neorealism, and in the films of Warhol and those of Akerman. What is of interest for us here is the way that a consideration of the

"images between images" can shape a transformative realism as well as an alternate notion of type, invalidating the essentialist question of a reality prior to representation.

The emphasis on dramatic equivalence between major and minor events that Bazin finds in neorealism[3] directly recalls the formal structure of *Jeanne Dielman*. Given the obvious disparities between films such as *Umberto D* (1950), organized by the conventions of analytic editing, and *Jeanne Dielman,* which resolutely avoids point-of-view structuring, one has to account for the particularities of contexts ('50s humanism and '70s micropolitics, for example) and styles (social melodrama and minimalist narrative) that set these dedramatized cinemas apart. While both projects equate the mundane and the dramatic, they can easily serve radically different agendas.

Typical of neorealist attention to the marginal discourse is a certain idealism. In *Jeanne Dielman,* Akerman disables romantic connotations by giving to the mundane its proper, and heavy, weight and by channeling the disturbing effect of a minimal-hyperrealist style into a narrative with definite political resonances. Her attention to a subject matter of social interest is literal—fixed frame, extended take—and so stylized as almost to be stilted. In this way, she denotes the idea of display itself; her cinema focuses hyperbolically on what Cesare Zavattini claimed as the main requirement of neorealist cinema—"social attention."[4] Indeed, in *Jeanne Dielman* this focus is quite extreme. Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Godard, Roberto Rossellini, and Jean-Marie Straub and Daniélle Huillet, among others, have all interpreted the demand for "social attention" as interchangeable with a temporal filmic focus on a single scene, situation, problem;[5] but the relentless frontality of Akerman's display of "social attention" still surprises.

Along with extended duration the quotidian is undoubtedly the signifier par excellence of the realistic impulse. The possibility of covering the events evoked by the notion of the quotidian is, as we shall see, the main lure for the realist desire. Indeed, with various different emphases, what marks the anti-idealist move in postwar culture is the privileging of everyday life. The accent on the everyday—on nonspecialized labor, private life, unstructured or extrainstitutional activity or thought—as well as on the underlying materiality and concreteness of cinematic elements, provides the traditional conjunction of modernism, realism, and politics.

In the period between neorealism and Akerman's films, the intrusion of extraneous elements, or of a different tempo (when the minor event receives an attention involving expanded duration), was shaped as a reality

surplus, a reality effect. In the films of this period, a number of strategies clearly function to make the everyday and material reality the signifier of the Real: the temporal equality accorded both significant and insignificant events; the programmatic foregrounding of materiality and visual concreteness (Robert Bresson, Straub and Huillet, Akerman); the use of amateur actors (De Sica, Zavattini, Jean Rouch, Rossellini); the reenactment of one's own experience (Zavattini, Antonioni, Rouch); and the use of real, literal time to depict events (Warhol, Akerman). That the quotidian generally resists direct representation in conventional cinema allows it to promise a "reserve" available to the realistic impulse. This reserve is precisely what realist cinema's various attempts at literalness or verisimilitude offer. As Maurice Blanchot writes, at first, the quotidian is defined in the negative, as, most immediately, the slice of life that is usually considered unworthy of narration. Whatever escapes denomination as some other part of life—work, leisure, etc.—confronts narration with a stubborn "stationary movement."[6] Yet this "unnamable" serves a basic function: "to participate in the diverse figures of True, . . . in the becoming of what occurs either below (economic and technical change) or above (philosophy, poetry, politics)."[7]

What interests me here is the variety of ways in which the "unnamable" concept of the quotidian attained importance between the mid '40s and the mid '70s, while accumulating different connotations, different nodules of expressiveness. *Umberto D, Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1966), and Akerman's work all chart a period in which phenomenology, existentialism, semiology, the *Annales* school, and feminism all in one way or another claimed the everyday as their object (or banner).

Charting the Everyday in Postwar Europe

Between the mid '40s and the mid '70s, questions of social reality and the everyday took vivid cinematic forms to represent a new focus of the postwar period—the privileging of materiality, of concrete existence and of social solidarity. Those concerns were tied not only to a generic humanist feeling, but to a Marxist sensibility geared toward analyzing material conditions.

The general critical interest in foregrounding minor events and occurrences is worth examining. Henri Lefebvre was the first to instill the notion of everyday life with theoretical currency; a Marxist, Lefebvre published the first volume of his *Introduction à une critique de la vie quotidienne* in 1947.[8] *Annales* historian Fernand Braudel's "The Situation

of History in 1950" suggests, following the work of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, that history needs to go beneath the surface of political events. The analyses of a history developing in a slow-paced rhythm—the *longue durée*—as well as the careful study of the fabric of the everyday life become the material for a New History that develops into the seventies. And Bazin's writings on cinematic realism appeared during the same postwar moment, suggesting a shared interest in everyday life on the part of cultural historians, sociologists, and critics.

The quotidian in this discussion occupies a double space: it is both the utopian space of change (what Lefebvre calls the "festival") and the elusive other in need of disclosure. In its very indefinability, its dissemination in the social fabric, it is the core of revolutionary potentiality. It "emerges," Lefebvre writes, "as a sociological point of feedback with a dual character": "it is the residuum (of all the possible specific and specialized activities outside social experience) and the product of society in general; it is the point of delicate balance and that where imbalance threatens."[9] The situationist Guy Debord addresses this point "where imbalance threatens" in his "Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life," a talk he gave through a tape recorder in the "Conference of the Group for Research on Everyday Life," convened by Lefebvre in 1961. There Debord talks about the "useless, vulgar and disturbing concept of everyday life": "What makes for the difficulty of even recognizing a terrain of everyday life is not only the fact that it has already become the . . . meeting ground of an empirical sociology and a conceptual elaboration; but also the fact that it . . . happens to be the stake in any revolutionary renewal of culture and politics."[10] Perhaps it is its resistance to conceptual representation that leads everyday life to be "policed and mystified by every means," to serve as "a sort of reservation for good natives who keep modern society running without understanding it."[11]

Debord wrote these words at a time when the everyday had become the ground of a continual revolution, when to consider the concept of the everyday "would imply the necessity of an integral political judgement."[12] By May 1968, a suspicion of representation, and of any form of social representativeness, encompassed every institution, including that of art cinema. Raoul Vaneigem, for instance, a member of the Situationist International, claimed that "Godard is to film what Lefebvre or Morin are to social critique: . . . [Aragon's or Godard's collages] are nothing other than an attempt to interpret "détournement" in such a way as to bring about its recuperation by the dominant culture."[13]

Aside from a territorial controversy (as to what art can resist commodifi-

cation), what is of interest here is the role of the quotidian as a space where noninstitutionalized practices can unfold. The utopian dimension of the everyday seems to lie precisely in its resistance to institutionalization. At the same time, of course, the very attempt to frame the everyday brushes against the conventional sense of everydayness as repetitious routine. The quotidian stands, then, both for material reality and for the impossibility fully to account for it, to represent it. Hence the desire to represent materiality either concretely, by exacerbating cinematic elements, or thematically, by inscribing the signs of this reality (banal events, mundane gestures, actions irrelevant to the plot), becomes the trademark of a realist impulse.

In historicizing the interest in everyday life, Lefebvre relates how, in the period immediately after World War II, the hopes for a "second liberation"—the "social change that was to follow . . . in the footsteps of political liberation"—had miscarried: "The workers were being dispossessed of their consciousness and attempts to build a new society based on this consciousness had not succeeded."[14] Moreover, the model for a "new society" had been thrown in disrepute by the identification of Stalinist socialism with totalitarianism. During the postwar reconstruction in France, economic and social regeneration were mistakenly taken as the "building of a new society." What was actually happening was an increasing social bureaucratization, a process that included the Communist Party. Given the polarization effected by the cold war, however, Marxist intellectuals had trouble openly admitting that both Stalinist and Communist Party policies were informed by totalitarianism, and geared their energy instead toward analyzing the failure of postwar revolutionary consciousness: alienated consciousness in capitalist society. This analysis demanded a rethinking of the vesting of revolutionary energies in a working class that noticeably shared the aspirations of the bourgeoisie.

The perception of a new postwar society led intellectuals to reformulate humanism, Lefebvre writes, in a way that "did not aspire to enlist rhetoric and ideology in the cause of a reform of superstructures (Constitution, State, Government) but to 'alter existence.'"[15] It was this new humanism that animated existentialism in its more popular and widespread version, visualizing the everyday as a space of continual commitment and choice. In a way, then, the energy around the concept of the everyday was nourished by disillusionment and disappointment over the rampant institutionalization of power after the war, in the spheres of leftist politics and academia as elsewhere.

Lefebvre's revision of his inaccurate understanding of capitalism as a

localized (affecting mostly the infrastructure) rather than a widespread force went hand in hand with the emergence of critical terms geared toward capitalist society as a whole: consumer society, the "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (Lefebvre, 1971), the "compartmentalization of everyday life." Earlier, romantic notions of the worker as bearer of revolutionary consciousness—because closer to the sphere of nonspecialized labor and therefore more prone to alienation—were gradually replaced. In a self-critique in his *Everyday Life in the Modern World,* Lefebvre remarked that "the theory of everyday life had become contaminated by a form of populism. . . . It implied both an obsession with the working classes . . . and *a philosophical obsession with the genuineness concealed within the ambiguity of experience*" (my italics).[16] To renounce the myth of the working class, and other exploited groups, as exempt from bourgeois or capitalist values was perhaps the greatest step toward the acknowledgment of, and direct confrontation with, the recuperating force of capitalist society, prompting an understanding of alienation that went far beyond the context of labor. Incorporating Hegel's notion of alienation as subjective misrecognition (minus that notion's idealist contours), critics could see alienation as implicated in the very formation of subjective consciousness.[17]

It is significant that the simultaneous efforts to redirect attention to material phenomena and to the movement of consciousness, to a worldly situation and to individual commitment and choice, had everyday life as their shared ground. It is indeed the everyday that allows for the precarious marriage of existentialism and Marxism. For both, at their most generous theoretical stretches, daily life is the arena where consciousness (class or subjective) and material reality need to be confronted. A recurring myth, however, lurks behind every new conceptualization of the everyday: that of some essential truth yet to be represented. The perceptual horizons of this myth are sketched above in the link between theories of everyday and the "philosophical obsession with the genuineness concealed within the ambiguity of experience." In slightly different arrangements these words reappear promoting the necessary affinity of cinema and phenomenology.

A Realism of Surfaces: Bazin and Neorealist Film

In "Film and the New Psychology" (1947), Maurice Merleau-Ponty defends the idea of such an affinity by remarking on the evidence, supposedly provided by cinema, of the permeation of subject and world. As a

perceptual object, he claims, a film can be associated with Gestalt theory, because "the movies . . . directly present to us that special way of being in the world . . . which we can see in the sign language of gesture and gaze and which clearly defines each person we know."[18] Later, Merleau-Ponty expands on the indissolubility of mind and body and the timeliness of Gestalt theory as a break with classical psychology. Likewise, "phenomenological or existential philosophy is largely an expression of surprise at this inherence of the self in the world and in others, . . . and an attempt to make us *see* the bond between subject and world . . . rather than to *explain* it as the classical philosophies did."[19] This argument encapsulates a recurring assumption in the realist rhetoric that persisted until Godard: the idea that description can be used to fend off conceptualization, as an access to and envisioning of the object and its inherence in the world. Merleau-Ponty's defense of the use of existential terminology in analyzing film is capped, for instance, with the phrase "because this is movie material par excellence."[20] Arguing that film is in harmony with (phenomenological or existential) philosophy, Merleau-Ponty defends a notion echoed in the writings of Rossellini, Zavattini, and Bazin, among others:[21] Zavattini, for example, states, "No other expressive medium has, as cinema, this originary and congenital capacity of photographing things that . . . deserve to be shown in their quotidianeity, meaning in their longer, truer duration; the machine . . . *sees* things and *not their concept*."[22] The parallel between existential philosophy, phenomenology, and cinema, then, is based on their shared avoidance of being a "showcase for ideas."

Bazin, the main propounder of an ontology of realist film, expounds on depth of field as a spatial correlate of the temporality of the long take, for "it confirms the unity of actor and decor, the total interdependence of everything real."[23] As Annette Michelson points out in her introduction to Noel Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*, this privileging of the long take and of depth of field places Bazin's writings in a precise cultural and political climate: "The viewer, unguided by an assertive style, proceeds in time to apprehend the *données* of that field, by implication rehearsing through the experience of film viewing the existential situation of being-in-the-world, 'choosing in ambiguity.'"[24] Michelson's use of expressions culled from existentialism and phenomenology locates the philosophical basis of Bazin's unequivocal endorsement of ambiguity, which he proposes as a correlate of the fluidity both of perception and of reality.

Bazin's writings uphold Amedée Ayfre's statements in his article "Neorealism and Phenomenology,"[25] where he suggests that Rossellini and a few others have tried, like Husserl, to "go . . . to things themselves. . . .

their approach as filmmakers runs an opposite course to that of analysis. . . . ceasing to delve subtly into 'characters' and 'milieux' . . . and in a sense attempting a total apprehension which is sequentially complete like existence in time."[26] Besides endorsing Ayfre's position, the style of Bazin's writings suggests an undecidability and an incompleteness that parallel his privileging of ambivalence. In fact, his prose recalls the thrust and tone of phenomenological description: the movements by which he tracks the object delineate the problematics of objectivity without confronting them,[27] a trait explored by Jacques Derrida in a fine critique of phenomenology which clarifies the philosophical grounds of this avoidance, and suggests both the benefits and the costs of the embrace of ambiguity. Actually, the phenomenological substratum of Bazin's writings reveals some of the same operations that, for Derrida, characterize Husserl's enterprise: phenomenological description is predicated on an obfuscation of the dichotomy between "structure" and "genesis." This unquestioned dichotomy creates a "philosophy of essences always considered in their objectivity, intangibility, their apriority: but, by the same token, it is a philosophy of experience, of becoming, of the temporal flux of what is lived which is the ultimate reference."[28] Veiled by the "serene use of these concepts [of structure and genesis]," Derrida says, is a "debate that regulates and gives its rhythm to the progression of description . . . and whose incompleteness, which leaves every major stage of phenomenology unbalanced, makes new reductions and explications indefinitely necessary."[29]

This need for new reductions and explications is the supplement animating any essentialist approach to reality, and inspiring Bazin's wish for (and deferral of) totality. His writings are characterized by a swinging motion between, on the one hand, granting the object an a priori existence to be unveiled by a transparent record and, on the other, continuously deferring definition in favor of the shifting movements of perception. As Philip Rosen notes, Bazin's "often noted belief in reality's 'ambiguity' works, among other things, to refuse the finality of constant criteria."[30] And this refusal allows the subject's continuing investment in "satisfying his 'obsession with realism.'"[31]

A grasp of the ambivalent status of description in both art and philosophy is crucial in understanding modern cinematic realism as well as the rhetoric of fidelity put forth by Rosselini's statements and Bazin's writings. In nineteenth-century realism, description must reconcile classical notions of "coherence and global organization" (aesthetic) with "the influence of non-literary theories (sociological, biological, anthropological, etc.) that affirm that the individual is subject to dependence on his en-

vironment."[32] Speaking of Rossellini, Bazin neatly confuses these two modes of causality as if narrative merely followed the demands of reality: "It is perhaps especially the structure of the narrative which is most radically turned upside down. It *must now respect the actual duration of the event.*" [my italics][33] Bazin hesitates, then, in submitting the subversion of narrative structure to aesthetics, leaning instead toward an "anthropological causality." The critic nevertheless comes across a bothersome detail: the cut. "The cuts that logic demands," Bazin writes, "can only be, at best, descriptive."[34] Equating a disjunctive representation to a fragmentary reality, he suggests that in Rossellini's films, ellipses imply actual lacunae in reality, or in our knowledge of reality. Deftly construing a fallacious analogy between two different orders of reality, Bazin performs the classical misconstruction informing any essentialist realism. He blatantly evades the issue of language as a medium with a reality of its own.

An important variant of this essentialist realism is exemplified in the positivism of sociological practices that embraced the new technology of film for its research.[35] The gap can only exist in filmic approaches such as observational cinema if it is perceived as a direct correlate of a faltering reality. As John Marshall and Emile de Brigard claim in "Idea and Event in Urban film," "Film can follow small events closely, letting them take their own time and produce their own content. The result is a sequence notable for the lack of conceptual and contextual framework which other forms of film attempt to supply."[36] This notion of sequence filming agrees with Bazin's conception that spatio-temporal continuity can preserve the unity of an event or act. Deployed in the controversy around the issue of objectivity in collecting data, these arguments are clearly defensive in presenting film as a recording medium for the social sciences. Their rhetoric of instrumentality shows how issues of filmic continuity are subsidiary to broader questions of avoiding a "conceptual" or "contextual" interference. To Colin Young, observational cinema differs from "simple note-taking" in that "the final film *can* represent the original event or situation directly. The filming process can be as much like observation as possible."[37]

Crossing various epistemological fields (ethnography, history, sociology, etc.), the idea of the "truth of vision" in Western literate culture entails an entire set of metaphors that presuppose a process of objectivity and objectification.[38] This "truth of vision" is manifested in cinema as a positivistic faith in film's technical neutrality. This faith experienced an upsurge with the development of direct sound recording in the early '60s, which allowed both American direct cinema and French cinema verité to assert a claim as records of reality, basing their procedures on a notion of truth as palpable, "visible" (and audible) evidence. This visualist approach extends into cinema verité's attempts to present the filmmaker's own subjectivity as concrete "image": since it is a condition of "truth" in cinema verité that the diegesis encompass the cinematic process itself, the interview situation itself may become part of the film's imagery, in image, voice, or camera axis, signaling the attempt to represent the shadow side of filmmaking—the filmmaker's own presence.[39]

The residual subjectivity muffled in verité practices appears mostly to emphasize the filmmaker's heroic hardship in getting behind the public person (in the case of direct cinema) or to the person's truth core (in verité practices).[40] The naïveté of direct cinema's fear of the spoken as actual interference—in *Nehru* (1962) Ricky Leacock verbally announces a pact of noninterference, i.e. he will not ask questions of Nehru—confirms this genre's positivistic faith in imagery. In addition, it makes clear the arena in which the authenticity of documentary is finally waged. In French cinema verité, it is the order of speech that negotiates the legitimacy of the film as relatively independent from ethical issues of interference. As subjectivity is objectified, represented as image and sound, mediation is cleansed of the guilty conscience of the documentarists. And what better place to get rid of this guilt than through a technological apparatus converted (as it privileges speech) into a confessional chamber? In addition, synchronized sound's tendency to create an alternation of statement with doubt or hesitation is seen as authenticating the fact that a presence is fully represented. As it evades editing, speech that is now fluent, now faltering circuitously confirms the contiguity of cinematic apparatus and the reality facing the camera. In a film in which hesitations and silences are left intact, the issue of authorial control is elided. Marks of interference are avoided, and the process of editing and choice is in a way bracketed. The truth of this cinema is moral and depends mostly on recording the emergence of conscience.[41]

Bazin's description of the neorealist use of ellipsis, and the emphasis in *Chronicle of a Summer* on hesitations, mistakes, and so on, are versions of this notion of a representational analogue that merely reproduces an incomplete reality, a reality still in the making.

The gap might also work, within a different aesthetic agenda, as a signifier of cinematic materiality, pointing to an explicit artistic artifice. In his analysis of Bresson's *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne,* Bazin shows the

stakes of a modern realism. In this film, Bresson amplifies sound to make it concrete and referential, a strategy Bazin reads as a stylistic choice creating an interplay of abstraction and concreteness:

> The rain, the murmur of the waterfall, the . . . hooves of the horses on the cobblestones, are not there just as a contrast to the simplification of sets . . . [or to] the literary and anachronistic flavor of the dialogue. They are not needed either for dramatic antithesis or for contrast in decor. They are there deliberately as neutrals, as foreign bodies, like a grain of sand that gets into and seizes up a piece of machinery.[42]

Bazin and Roland Barthes (in "The Reality Effect," 1968), sift with similar critical finesse through the narratives of modern realist cinema and literature, looking for the impure and concrete element that will create a gap, a rupture with conventional forms of verisimilitude. The "detail" for Barthes is the "irrelevant event," for Bazin the "grain of sand that gets into and seizes up a piece of machinery." Barthes's critical essays are turned toward exposing the illusions of referentiality; Bazin's are packed with the mounting contradictions of exposing how the real is constructed at the same time that they minimize the role of cinematic mediation. Both writers embrace ruptures and divergences from functional narrative as signs of a new, modern verisimilitude. To acknowledge the points of contact between the structural semiotician's and the realist critic's investment on referentiality, allows one to grasp more fully the nuances of cinemas involved with realist representation. It allows one to perceive the shared ground of neorealism and Godard's work. Godard's descriptive excursions, for instance, function both as expansions of the diegetic reality—in their attention to overseen, nonrepresented realities—and as reminders of the structural place occupied by the Barthesian "irrelevant event," the gap.

Although still operative in films, by the mid '60s the myth of unmediated reality is theoretically (and at times practically) in question. The idea of the "inherent" phenomenological yielding of the truth in film is put on hold. An oscillation between a belief in the values of reference and a critique of the "referential illusion" frames most of the French and American avant-garde film culture of the '60s. Within and outside narrative projects, the illusion of a continuum in representation is challenged. The versions of radical cinema represented by Godard and Alain Resnais (in their fiercely eclectic shifts of referential ground), Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka (in their expressive and structural projects), constitute, among several others, examples of an active bracketing of referentiality.

From Surface to Structure: Barthes, Godard, and the Textualization of Reality

By the mid '50s, description assumes a polemical role, expounded in the theories around the *nouveau roman,* the "new novel." Alain Robbe-Grillet, in *For a New Novel,* relentlessly questions the humanist bent of the traditional novel. His fiercest attacks are directed at notions of literary analogy, which he sees as infected by a "pananthropic" notion. For Robbe-Grillet, not surprisingly, nature and its myths are "clogged" by anthropomorphic language.[43] Quoting Roquentin in Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*—"All the objects that surrounded me were made of the same substance as myself, of a kind of shoddy suffering"—Robbe-Grillet concludes, "Drowned in the *depth* of things, man ultimately no longer even perceives them: his role is soon limited to experiencing, in their name, totally *humanized* impressions and desires."[44] Instead, Robbe-Grillet proposes a description that records "the distance between the object and myself and the distances of the object itself (its exterior distances, i.e., its measurements)." This proposal comes down to "establishing that things are here and that they are nothing but things each limited to itself."

As description is questioned as a methodology—does it reveal its object or create it?—there is a parallel shift of interest from a humanistically informed subject matter to a concern with structures. This shift—represented in philosophy by structuralism, in psychoanalysis by Lacan, and in film by approaches such as Godard's—participates in the general demand for an analysis of everyday life and alienated existence. Perhaps this need is justified by the very nature of structure. As Poster points out, "Structures made their effects through their absences. . . . one is aware of buying this object in the store, not of the structure of commodities."[45]

Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) explicitly attempts to make this structuring absence somehow visible. The significance of Barthes's book lies both in its focus on everyday activities as refracted by media—i.e., already seen as spectacle and commodity—and in its need to decode such subjects as wrestling matches, Garbo's face, ornamental cookery, soap powders and detergents, and other myths as languages. The critical approach that Barthes proposes leans on semiology, unveiling the "natural given" as a historical construct.

With the expansion of the interest in subjecting reality to textual examination, using semiology as a bridge, cultural critics perceive the notion of the everyday as complicit with consumer society and its figures of specta-

cle and visibility (i.e., the devices through which that society makes itself amenable to desire, in advertising, fashion, and so on). The mass media are seen to epitomize the diffuse powers of alienation in the quotidian. In a more historicizing vein than Barthes's *Elements of Semiology* and *Mythologies,* Lefebvre sketches, through the precarious semiological term "collapse of referentials," what he sees as the disintegration of everyday life. For him, the process starts in the early twentieth century and attains its apogee during the postindustrial period of the mid '50s and early '60s: "The enormous amount of *signifiers* liberated or insufficiently connected to their corresponding signifieds (words, gestures, images and signs), and thus made available for advertising and propaganda: a smile as the symbol of everyday happiness."[46]

Given the massive industrialization that the production of household goods had undergone by the early '60s, along with the new media pressure to participate in the market, Marxist critics such as Lefebvre and Jean Baudrillard (*Le système des objets,* 1968, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe,* 1972) found themselves forced to analyze the change in the relation between man and product. As Michel de Certeau puts it in his introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life,* consumption, "an activity that is unsigned, unreadable and unsymbolized," becomes the cultural/economic production of nonproducers.[47] The writings of both Lefebvre and Baudrillard retain a nostalgic tinge: the first author privileges speech as the single realm of unity between sign and meaning, the second sets his analysis of functionality and serially produced objects against a moment when objects still retained some relation with human, natural time. (The time a tree takes to grow, for instance, sustains the symbolic value of wooden furniture.) To address the social changes manifest after World War II, both Lefebvre and Baudrillard refer to a lost moment, when society relied more on artisanal production.[48]

Even before postmodern writers celebrate the idea of nondiscrimination between levels of authenticity, one witnesses a relatively simpler acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of representation in social life. This recognition, exemplified in Godard, corresponds to a historical moment in which a humanist Marxism still envisages a critical gesture that might transform society. Godard's jumbling of different referential registers in his cinematic textures is situated at this juncture; his work absorbs the critical analysis of the disjunction between sign and referent performed by Lefebvre and Barthes, along with phenomenology's fascination with the "inherence of man in the world" defended by Merleau-Ponty. Godard's apparently contradictory fascination with and demystification of the sur-

face of things can be read through this critical nexus. For implicit in the critique of "the collapse of referentials" carried on by both Lefebvre and Barthes is a romantic longing: Barthes's "third meaning" or "obtuse meaning," in its purposive praise of ambivalence (of how much more one can read into an image), can be aligned with the inscrutable face of Henry Fonda as Godard describes it in his early writings (an analysis inflected in its turn by Bazin's phenomenology). Discussing Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man,* Godard writes,

> Reaction shot and long close-up of Henry Fonda, staring abstractedly, pondering, thinking, being. . . . The beauty of each of these close-ups, with their searching attention to the passage of time, comes from the sense that necessity is intruding on triviality, essence on existence. . . . Its only criterion is the exact truth. We are watching the most fantastic of adventures because we are watching the most perfect, the most exemplary, of documentaries.[49]

By the early '60s, the critique of consumption takes on the ironic shape of pop art, which Godard's cinema brilliantly assimilates in a clear grasp of the double register of images. In subscribing to the regime of quotation, in reproducing images (posters, fashion photos, outdoor shots, etc.) as opposed to reality, Godard's cinema, from *Breathless* (1959) to *Alphaville* (1965) and *Made in USA* (1966), sows the seed of a double referentiality that later artists, in a different, postmodern frame, will purposefully blur and make indistinct. Unlike Warhol's and Cindy Sherman's work, however, Godard's films rather accentuate the borders between the different realities they refer to, even when not calling attention to them explicitly. In *Two or Three Things,* for example, Godard discusses the sorts of realities he might be focusing on as the camera scans and analyzes potential subjects. The critical anxiety of being unable to cover reality in its entirety is transformed into a poetic semantic quest. Over images of Juliette's husband's garage, Godard whispers in voice-over,

> Are these really the words and the images I should employ? Are they the only ones? Aren't there others? Do I speak too loud? . . . Do I look from too far or from too close? . . . should one speak of Juliette or of the leaves? Since it is impossible, anyway, to talk about both at the same time . . . let's say they both were swiftly trembling in this late October afternoon.[50]

In Godard, the filmic and semantic vocabulary includes choice. This is a far cry from Warhol's work, in which the camera stares seemingly unques-

tioningly, for what seems too long a time, at realities already loaded with public status (the Empire State Building, say), or at would-be star performers. Although Warhol's politics of banalizing meaning couldn't be more distant from Godard's creation of a political meaning for the banal and the quotidian, both directors' works are major signifiers of the limits of the critical gesture in cinema.

Godard's critique of referential illusions and his simultaneous debt to existentialism and semiotics will be discussed later in this book. We turn now to another cinema involved in an equation of the dramatic and the banal.

Beyond Cinematic Positivism: The Antirescue Cinema of Andy Warhol

Zavattini, reporting an American film producer's description of the difference between Hollywood and neorealist narrative, zealously and emphatically corrects him by introducing no less than a cinematic ideal: he demands more.

> "This is how *we* (in Hollywood) would imagine a scene with an aeroplane. The plane passes by . . . a machine gun fires . . . the plane crashes . . . and this is how *you* [neorealists] would imagine it. The plane passes by . . . the plane passes by again . . . the plane passes by once more. . . ." He was right. But we have still not gone far enough. It is not enough to make the aeroplane pass by three times: we must make it pass by twenty times.[51]

Zavattini's rhetoric emerges in the order of excess. It is composed of exclamations: "Today! Today! Today!"[52] His interviews, notes, and articles constantly repeat the need to repeat. The climax of this energy for analyzing social fact lies in the director's plea that a film should follow the life of a man to whom nothing happens for ninety minutes.

Implicit in Zavattini's plea is a call for a relation between theme and form—between the quotidian and a "truer" temporal relation in representing it. Such a relation might involve the pairing of routine activity with some visual or narrative suggestion of recurrence, or with an attempt at literal rendition. From repetition to representation in real, literal time, one traverses a wide spectrum of narrative possibilities. In either case, what is suggested is a surplus of reality. This surplus can be provided by the expansive illusion of repetition—"She woke up, as she does any morning"—

or in that of a one-to-one relation between representation and reality: the illusion of the unique or singular record, the literal representation.

While excess rules both Zavattini's inflammatory rhetoric and Warhol's literal cinematic procedures, Zavattini's motto is not exactly answered by the extended duration of films such as Warhol's *Eat* (1963), *Kiss* (1963), *Sleep* (1963), etc., or for that matter by the daily activities depicted in real time in *Jeanne Dielman*. Both Warhol and Akerman choose the literal approach rather than the "iterative" representation (the deduction of a recurrent series through the presentation of a single event). But there is a crucial difference between, on the one hand, Akerman's and Warhol's excesses, both a form of minimal hyperrealism, and, on the other, the expansive thrust of neorealist narrative, which, for example, may try to signify all unemployed Italians through a single character such as Umberto D. The minimal-hyperrealist rendition undoes any idea of symbolic transcendence. Besides injecting representation with the effect of a surplus of reality, literal time robs it of the possibility of standing for something other than that concrete instance.

For Zavattini, "no other medium of expression has cinema's original and innate capacity for showing things that we believe worth showing, as they happen day by day—in what we might call their 'dailiness,' their longest and truest duration."[53] This duration that he proposes as innately cinematic is more appropriately seen as another figure of the excess required in the unending search for truth, an excess of the same order as the ability Margaret Mead imagines a 360-degree camera might have to register a vanishing tribe, or of the fixed camera she mentions in her discussion of film's potential for objectivity: "The camera or tape recorder that stays in one spot, that is not tuned, wound, refocused, or visibly loaded, does become part of the background scene, and what it records did happen."[54] Mead could not have known that she was advocating for her objective record the same basic cinematic framing—the long fixed take—that would reveal the amazing performances in Warhol's films, and would create the rigid, distanced, albeit subjective perspective in Akerman's.

In Warhol, for instance, the issue of the degree of objectivity in representation is moot. With an ethnographic sensibility (his films show the interactions of a very specific "tribe"), Warhol undermines observational and direct cinema by hyperbolizing, to the point of caricature, the very basis of their existence: the notion of noninterference. He trades their positive indexing of the ethic of noninterference for the equally ethical, and in his case actively political, stance of indifference. Merely by enhanc-

ing duration, the fixity of the frame, and the intrusion of chance, he undermines the belief underlying observational cinema and American direct cinema that a measured closeness between subject and object guarantees objectivity.[55]

Warhol's attack on the subject/object dichotomy is twofold. First, he undermines the path of anthropological enterprise by deflating its pretext. Once one chooses as one's object something already of known interest, there is nothing to be discovered. Shrouded with prior representations—being, in fact, banal, even clichéd—the object makes no claim to be newly unearthed or newly revealed in Warhol's films. It is a surface before he records it in film. On screen, the Empire State Building comes "alive" only in disallowing essence—comes alive as a simulacrum.

Second, Warhol's fixed camera and extended takes exaggerate the filmmaker's usual interest in the subject to the point of blindness. If a fixed camera in principle means noninterference, a zoom shot signals closeness; from neorealism to observational cinema, from direct cinema and cinema verité to Rossellini's didactic films, a savvy combination of long takes and zooms represents the compromise between lack of mediation and genuine interest. But Warhol overdoes these techniques, altogether discrediting interest, as well as cinematic functionality. His aleatory zooms (in *The Chelsea Girls*, 1966, *Lonesome Cowboys*, 1967, etc.) flaunt an arbitrariness that comments retroactively on a whole range of essentialist quests in cinema.

Warhol exposes the limits of the humanist perspective in cinema. He defies it initially by suggesting a radical lack of empathy among filmmaker, object, and spectator: the cinematic and the profilmic are purposefully at odds, resulting either in a busy—*The Chelsea Girls, Vinyl* (1965)—or a simplified—*Sleep, Blow Job* (1963)—arbitrariness that never caters to the spectator. Warhol's forty-five–minute *Eat,* six-hour *Sleep,* and eight-hour *Empire* (1964) resemble exaggerated responses to Zavattini's plea for a film that would follow someone to whom nothing happens for ninety minutes. After Warhol's attack on spectatorial comfort, Zavattini's assertion, once bold in its privileging of "nothingness," seems too careful a compromise: ninety minutes, after all, is the normal length of a commercial feature. Warhol's films mock and subvert all the basic values associated with neorealist "nothingness." Warhol's extended renditions of cliché images create a different register through which to read neorealism's narrativized phenomenology of the quotidian. His gaze allows no space for the heroic. The changing backgrounds that, in neorealism, throw the constancy of the hero into perspective is dropped. In place of a narra-

tive in which the humanist hero is outlined against a tokenistic surface of varying sites and situations, Warhol proposes an antinarrative in which variety issues from any object looked at long enough. Instead of cashing in on the neglected and "irrelevant"—the neorealist strategy—Warhol doubles the banality of his objects by promoting an overvisibility where it is superfluous. In overdoing his reductions (single themes filmed for extended periods of time), Warhol excludes even the limited suggestiveness of neorealism's policy of variegation and tokenism.

Bazin more than anyone sees realism to be at its best when it pursues ideas of noninterference and the integrity of reality so as to enlarge the perceptual field of representation. Hence he puts a moral value on the use of the long take and depth of field at the expense of montage; for him, these devices forgo artifice. Discontinuity and gaps constitute the main threats to the flawless homogeneity of a cinema intended as an analogue to an equally full reality. Taking this idea one step further, what matters is no longer the actual physical integrity of representation—its lack of cuts—but that it *appear* to be physically integral (as in *Umberto D*).[56] Despite Bazin's theories (but in accord with his aesthetic inclinations), from Jean Renoir to Rossellini, the textural integrity provided through the long take has been less an assurance of homogeneity than the counterpoint to a mise-en-scène intended to resist harmony. The long take here is meant not as an analogue for reality but as one more element in a subtle weave of artifice and spontaneity, of theatricality and realistic detail. Modern cinema's appropriation of the long take is to be understood as the background for the emergence of an "effect of reality," in Barthes's sense. The "irrelevant detail" (Rossellini's term) appears best when set in an unfractured shot.

Warhol's literal representations foreclose on the differential play between depth and surface that constitutes the truth of modernist cinema. Rossellini, Renoir, Akerman, and other modernist realists use the qualities of cinema to set up material clashes with idealized versions of reality. Warhol establishes a forceful and arbitrary entropy of registers. One could say that with Warhol, the materiality and concreteness that pop up in these directors' films are drastically amplified as pure (and passive) resistance. Warhol undoes the main knot underwriting their visions of a truer cinema. Where they invoke intention, he seems indifferent. His cinematic choices are aprioristic, and provoke randomness of performance (in his scripted films) and perceptual arbitrariness (in his early work). At the base of any cinema *engagé* is human interest. In Warhol, interest is challenged on all fronts: the filmmaker is absent, the object is banal, the spectator is bored. The spectator's confrontation with his or her own physical and mental

endurance delineates a cinema that has given up on the notions of truth that sustain other alternative cinema (Akerman's included). But interest is not simply traded for indifference, for the Warhol strategy puts forth a politics of indifferentiation: identity wavers between representation and reality, between acting and being, flickering constantly and unstably.

By contrast with Warhol's politics of indifference neorealism's and cinema verité's search for authenticity in reenacting events seems hampered by its desire to find a truth lying always beyond materiality, beyond the body. As suggested, Warhol's undermining of search, effort, and intention makes any cinematic approach seem lame before it even gets close to its object. So his cinema never does get close: Warhol does not *intend* to "get inside" the objects of his cinema (as Rouch would have it). Yet neither does it search for a feeling of being "outside"—for an alienation effect, of the kind that might give rise to a sudden empathy (as in Godard, Bresson, and Rossellini). The literalness of Warhol's cinema qualifies these two approaches. On the one hand, the event's radical duration on screen disallows the equation of fissures in the illusion with truth. His work provokes such a random surfacing of fissures—mistakes in performance (*The Chelsea Girls*), shifts in address (*Beauty #2,* 1965), mixings of genres (*Lonesome Cowboys*)—that a gap or error cannot be taken as more true than articulated speech. On the other hand, his enhancement of cinematic materiality is so pervasive as to defy the pedagogic thrust of a modernist cinema intent on the disclosure of materiality (Godard and Straub and Huillet being the main examples). Moreover, it is precisely through an apparently unfissured surface, in a Bazinian sense, that Warhol shifts discontinuity from the text onto the spectator's perception.

Neither Bazin's concept of an unfissured realist representation nor Warhol's overturning of such a notion, however, responds fully to the neorealist desire for totality. This essentialist conception leans on metonymic expansion, which might dissect for us, for instance, the bedroom where Umberto D sleeps, but might also create a physical and moral geography that suggests a totality. In this respect, the attention to details, and the presentation of sites and events as illustrative tokens, operates in neorealist film in much the same way as the display of iconographic images works to shape allegorical meanings in conventional cinema. In *Bicycle Thieves,* all of Rome (or rather all of Italy and of the postwar world) is meant to be represented by the syncretically woven neighborhoods and sites that Antonio traverses. The wanderings of the characters in *Umberto D* or *Bicycle Thieves* signify a solely "physical" coverage of reality only superficially: here multiplicity—of spaces, of people—always reconvenes on a center, sucked back to it by a human perspective that is represented in the films by a human body, a hero. It is this heroic body, the generic postwar individual, that Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* takes to task. While Warhol substitutes the character's body for the filmic body, transforming the one-to-one nature of literal representation in an ultimate decentering of humanism, Akerman proves how a body can flicker in and out of character (through a kind of oscillating perception made possible by literal representation) and still further a narrative.

Akerman's minimal hyperrealism, in so many ways similar to Warhol's, makes a positive claim to tell a story; her equation of drama and everydayness is made from within narrative. Moreover, it is in instituting another sort of hero(ine) that she mounts her blows on essentialist humanism. The singularity of Akerman's Jeanne defies the generic humanism of Umberto D or Antonio. The historical grounding of this sort of heroine is represented at its best in Akerman's fusion of a minimalist hyperrealist sensibility with an acute awareness of 70's micropolitics, and of feminism in particular. And it is this awareness of the singularity of a woman's everydayness that forms the backbone of Akerman's corporeal cinema, a cinema whose split concern with referentiality and cinematic materiality can be examined in the context of other contemporaneous artistic practices.