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**Buddhism and Postmodernism:
The Work of Bill Viola.**

By

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Introduction

"The state of complete value-relativism is culturally and spiritually enervating. At the same time it looks superficially like the Buddhist position, for Buddhism also asserts that values are relative, that our feelings, thoughts and beliefs all arise in dependence on conditions." - Kulananda (1997, p.211-212)

Celebrated by its defenders, bemoaned by its detractors, this state of value-relativism is but one feature of the phenomenon designated 'postmodernism'. No longer a neologism, the term has had common currency since the mid-70s and can be used, following Jean Francois Lyotard, to describe "the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies" (Jencks, 1992, p.138). The alleged dissolution of the so-called bourgeois hegemony and the development of mass culture provide us with the backdrop against which the postmodern phenomenon emerged. Inevitably, the term postmodernism has been invested with a sense of crisis by many cultural commentators, to whom it has spelt indeterminacy, fragmentation, parody and the dispersal of the subject. Many regard it not as a world-view but as an anti-worldview, characterized by the removal of those factors deemed necessary for a world-view: God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world and truth as correspondence. Dick Hebdige comments that "postmodernity is modernity without the hopes and dreams which made modernity bearable" (Jencks, 1992, p.120).

The pessimism and sense of paralysis of history surrounding postmodernism may be seen to stem from an overemphasis on theory. Hal Foster, for instance has been highly critical of what he sees as "the false normativity of reactionary postmodernism" (Kearney, 1988, p.32), postmodernism as understood to derive from poststructural/deconstructive theories. Lyotard in *La condition postmoderne* (1979), first articulated the links between poststructuralist philosophy and postmodern cultural practices. According to his argument, the latter may be seen as instantiations of the former. That which Foster describes as the false normativity of reactionary postmodernism perhaps confirms Claude Levi-Strauss' assertion that the "true reality is never the most obviously real" (Kearney, 1986, p.253). There is no ignoring the discrepancy between the conceptual 'end of man' posited by the poststructuralists, for instance, and our lived experience where the concept 'man' continues to operate. "We have killed our gods", as William James has put it, and "yet remain ourselves

creatures of will, hope, desire and belief" (Jencks, 1992, p.203). Today pragmatism is the only philosophy of action. Commentators like Foster have been calling for a postmodernism of resistance, one that will provide an appropriate response to the exhaustion of modernity and its avant-garde, and one that will replace some criteria for ethical and aesthetic judgements. The neo-conservative, Daniel Bell considers a religious revival the only solution; one that will "link up with quasi-natural traditions that are immune to criticism, permit clearly defined identities, and provide the individual with existential security" (Jencks, 1992, p.161)

Such quasi-natural traditions are understood as just that: 'seemingly' natural in the (post)structuralist approach, particularly in the wake of Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology, which sees nature, or rather our perceptions of it, as proceeding from culture and not the other way around. That a traditional status might confer upon a religious system some immunity to criticism is doubtful particularly if that system has shown itself to be highly critically assailable in the past, as is the case with Christianity where "the victory of science spelled the defeat of faith" (Sangharakshita, 1988, p. 21). An altogether radical approach in the (post)Christian context now begins to exert a persuasive influence. In 1984 Andreas Huyssen argued that feminism and the women's movement, anti-imperialism and the ecology movement, along with the growing awareness of "other cultures, non-European, non-Western cultures" had the creative potential of "a new postmodernism of resistance that would satisfy the needs of the political and those of the aesthetic." (Jencks, 1992, p. 322). It cannot have escaped the attention of those calling for a religious revival as an antidote to nihilistic postmodernism that the fastest-growing religion in the West is Buddhism. Not that Buddhism needs the recommendation of its popularity. Much of the current Western interest therein is no doubt tainted by what Paul Ricoeur identified as the specifically **modern** erotic and aesthetic fascination with the Orient (Jencks, 1992, p. 69). Buddhism is as vulnerable to misrepresentation at the hands of its friends as of its enemies in the West, particularly considering the fact of its decline in the countries where it was originally established.

According to Richard Kearney, "where modernity evolves, postmodernity involves" (Kearney, 1988, p.26). The involvement of the 'perennial philosophy of the East', the Dharma as postulated by the two and a half thousand year old Buddhist traditions is due not merely to an extreme instance of postmodern retroactivity or an eclectic whim, but based on a number of distinct parallels between Buddhism and the

trajectories of postmodern thinking. In fact Buddhism entered Western cultural life with Schopenhauer and eighteenth century Romanticism, an association which inevitably affected the emphasis in its dissemination and coloured its reception. However, there is nothing intrinsically romantic about the teaching. It shares a language of conditionality with the arts, with science, philosophy and psychotherapy, a language never shared by Christianity. "Paradoxically", writes Erich Fromm, "Eastern Religious thought turns out to be more congenial to Western rational thought than Western religious thought itself" (Fromm, 1960, p.80). Urgyen Sangharakshita (the leader of the Western Buddhist Order, whose work will inform much of what follows), has observed that:

when the star of Buddhism first rose above these icy academic horizons, its dependence on reason rather than faith, its freedom from credulity and superstition not unnaturally caused it to be regarded as an ethico-philosophical system rather than as a religion in the Christian sense of the term. (Sangharakshita, 1988, p. 21).

According to its own definition, Buddhism should be regarded as a religion and an understanding of religion in the truest sense of the term hinges on a proper understanding of the Dharma. This is very important, because although this thesis will in large part be given over to an exploration of the parallels between post-modernism and Buddhist philosophy, no inference should be made that they represent one and the same thing. On the contrary, the former constitutes the abidingly intellectual/aesthetic pursuits of contemporary Western philosophers, artists and architects, the latter as practised for the last two and a half thousand years is a spiritual vehicle with a transcendental goal. An exposition of their points of contact may serve the dual purpose of explaining the presence of Buddhism in the postmodern context, and of exploring its informative potential with regard to the most urgent postmodern questions, inclusive of aesthetic and ethical considerations.

By way of introduction, the proposed thesis will be presented as follows:

Chapter One will attempt to elucidate the Buddhist position with an exploration of its most important features: Conditioned Co-production and the formulations of the Spiritual Path derived from it, most concisely expressed as the Three Trainings (Skt. *trisiksha*): Morality (*sila*), Meditation (*samadhi*) and Wisdom (*prajna*). Emphasis will be placed on those aspects of Buddhist philosophy deemed relevant to postmodern discourses, particularly those pertaining to the problematizing of the subject/ego. Some of the finer points of the teaching, including issues related to language will be

postponed for consideration in tandem with the conclusions of poststructuralist theory in the third chapter. It must be said that Buddhism constitutes a vast field of information to which little justice can be done here. It renounces the claim to a complete and coherent view of the universe but nevertheless its cosmology, its account of evolution¹ and its position on the nature of consciousness² for instance, could usefully be compared with the equivalent contemporary Western positions in the manner of this thesis.

Chapter Two will concentrate on superstructuralism and its precipitation of the postmodern condition of knowledge. The term 'superstructuralism' was coined by Richard Harland to indicate both the structuralist movement and the poststructural/deconstructive developments subsequent to it. The latter can be thought of as a development rather than a negation of the former. For Harland what distinguishes poststructuralism from the original movement is its radically anti-scientific position. Basically, it draws out the **philosophical** implications of the structuralist way of looking at structures. Although structuralism, in foregrounding the relations existing between things, defines itself in opposition to the item-centred approach of empiricism, its exponents' "stance is still the traditional scientific stance of Objectivity, their goal the traditional goal of Truth" (Harland, 1987, p. 2). Again the discussion in Chapter Two will be tailored to fit the requirements of the thesis, concentrating mainly on structuralism and emphasising the role of the linguistic structuralist Saussure, and the psychoanalytic approach of Lacan over the broader anthropological approach of Levi-Strauss and the Marxism of Althusser for instance.

Chapter Three will be given over specifically to the parallels between Buddhist philosophy and poststructuralism; between the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna and Jacques Derrida, and their respective positions with regard to language (*sunyata* or 'emptiness' and alterity/*differance*) and, by extension, with regard to their stance in relation to the natural world. Discussed here will be Derrida's deconstruction of Husserl's phenomenology and how the thrust of his conclusions relates to the first two of the Four Noble Truths postulated by Buddhism (the second two are essentially spiritual and therefore beyond the scope of Derrida's approach). Further reference will be made to Lacan's problematization of the ego, the dismantling of which is an active project in the practice of Buddhism.

In concluding the account of the parallels obtaining between the two systems of approach, Chapter Four will focus on the theory and practical work of Bill Viola, an artist who has acknowledged a debt to both structural theory and the Buddhist tradition and who might be said to be working at the crossroads between them. As such the fourth chapter will present a critical assessment of his work.

Notes:

1. Buddhism posits a spiritual yet still mundane world or plain (the Brahma-loka) 'between' the objective world of matter and the transcendental non-dual state of Nirvana. (These three plains of existence correspond to the three bodies (*trikaya*) said to be attributes of the Buddha : the *Nirmanakaya* or Created Body, the *Sambhogakaya* or Body of Reciprocal Enjoyment and the *Dharmakaya* or Body of Truth). The line of biological development from amoeba to man is not single but double, being the joint product of spiritual degeneration or involution (*vivatta*), on the one hand, and of material progress or evolution (*samvatta*) on the other hand:

Every step in the evolutionary process results from a coalescence between an upward movement of material progress and a downward movement of psychic or spiritual degeneration. Man is not only risen ape but fallen angel, and the history of the human race may be summarised as a spiritual involution within a biological evolution. (Sangharakshita, 1957, p. 60).

2. David Ray Griffin, *The Reenchantment of Science*: "In summary both dualism and materialism are unintelligible. But if the modern premise that the elementary units of nature are insentient is accepted, dualism and materialism are the only options" (Jencks, 1992, p.360). Dualism and materialism in this context can be identified with the two basic errors according to Buddhism, eternalism and nihilism, respectively. The question of whether or not the vital principle at the foundations of consciousness, is identical with the body is left unanswered and is deemed unanswerable by Buddhism.

Chapter one - Buddhism

Introduction

"So long as religion is thought of in exclusively theistic terms and philosophy remains divorced from any kind of spiritual discipline, Buddhism is neither" - Sangharakshita (1957, p. 9).

The charge of nihilism incurred by poststructuralist philosophy, is also one that has been levelled at Buddhism many times in its two and a half thousand year history and was levelled at the Buddha himself by some of his contemporaries. The charge, however, is erroneous. Rather, Buddhism identifies nihilism (Skt. *ucchedavada*) and its corollary, eternalism (*sasvatavada*), as the two basic errors. These two positions are accommodated within the classical propositional disjunction : the very basic either/or option which situates A and B as identical or A and B as different. That A and B are identical leads to nihilism when A is the vital principle (*jiva*) and B is the physical body (*sarira*). This was the position of the Buddha's contemporary Ajita Kesa-Kambalin who insisted that at the death of the physical body the human being is "cut off" (the translated etymological root of *ucchedavada*; the annihilation doctrine wrongly attributed to the Buddha maintained that after death the *Tathagata*, or 'Enlightened Being' is effectively extinguished and no longer exists). That A and B are different leads to eternalism. Buddhism refuses eternalism in the sense that it refuses to entertain any notion of individual immortality and is essentially non-theistic. Chapter Two will show how the either/or options of existing ideological interpretations of the world are replaced in the Superstructuralist approach, with an alternative mode of response. Between its two basic errors, Buddhism positions itself as the Norm, the Middle Path, or, to give Buddhism its correct name, the Dharma.

The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha or spiritual community are collectively known as the Three Jewels (*triratna*) of Buddhism. An account of Buddhist philosophy is perhaps best delivered under the first two headings, the Buddha and the Dharma. The Buddha, after all, initiated the project of Human Enlightenment, which is the central theme and central preoccupation of Buddhism, and the Dharma outlines the prescribed means of achieving it, the means whereby "a man becomes what he potentially is" (Fromm, 1960, p. 80).

(i) The Buddha (563-483 B.C.E.¹): The Buddha Gautama was born in Lumbini in the Sakya republic. We are told he achieved Enlightenment (*nirvana*) at the age of thirty-five in Bodh Gaya and for seven weeks after the event, debated with himself whether or not to relate his discoveries to others. The Dharma, he likened to a poisonous water snake "difficult to grasp rightly and as dangerous to grasp wrongly" (Majjhima-Nikaya 1.132 ; Sangharakshita, 1957, p.98). The Pali text, the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta (literally "Setting in motion the Wheel of the Dharma") records the first public utterance of the Buddha's career, delivered at Sarnath. He exhorts the five monks gathered to avoid the extremes of self-indulgence and self-torture and to follow instead the Middle Way. He proclaimed the four Noble Truths of Suffering, the Arising of Suffering, the Cessation of Suffering and the Path leading to that Cessation. He continued to teach until his death at Kusinagara, aged eighty.

More important than the scant biographical details available to us is the ideal of Human Enlightenment which the Buddha represents. It has often been wrongly suggested that, following his death, he was 'deified' by his followers. The Buddha in fact identified any belief in a personal god, a creator figure, as an impediment to spiritual progress. However, the Buddha, following his Enlightenment, cannot be considered to have been an ordinary man either. His chief contribution to knowledge was of a conative/affective order. If the aspiration is towards knowledge of the Self, then the traditional epistemological dichotomy implied between the knower and the object known can no longer obtain. In any move closer to self knowledge, the Self is necessarily changed, invested with greater awareness. When this awareness is complete, Buddhists often describe the state of knowledge which prevails thereafter as an awareness of Reality, of things as they really are. Such an awareness cannot be considered the preserve of an ordinary human being/subject, because in this state of awareness the subject/object distinction is no longer experienced. That the subject is problematic is self-evident for Buddhists. The human condition through which we experience ourselves as subjects is unsatisfactory, because, like all conditioned things it is subject to change and impermanence. This is Buddhism's first Noble Truth, the truth of unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*dukkha*).

Michel Foucault saw the postmodern apotheosis as the development of human thought towards the goal of its own extinction (Harland, 1987, p. 117). Curiously 'extinction' (*nirodha*), is one of many terms traditionally used as synonyms for nirvana, Enlightenment. The danger here is that the Buddhist position be

misunderstood as nihilist. According to Buddhism, Enlightenment is the natural ideal for humankind, natural because it corresponds to human nature and to human needs. It involves the development of the qualities of awareness, compassion and spiritual/mental energy to their full potential. That these qualities are germinal in all human beings is, for Buddhists, what separates human beings from animals. In this they are somewhat less pessimistic than Freud, who considered 'brotherly love' an artificial ideal, foreign to our nature and ultimately an unreasonable demand; what he referred to as 'mystical experience', he dismissed as a regression to infantile narcissism (Fromm, 1960, p. 89). Freud's pessimism is understandable to some extent. In the absence of awareness, the human desiderative nature will force outlets at an 'animal' level. Sublimation of desire is not only the central problem of ethics, but also the dynamo behind the whole mechanism of the spiritual life, refining rather than squandering human energy.

'Mysticism' is a word too often invoked in connection with Buddhism. Even if the theistic connotations of the term are overlooked, it is unsuitably nebulous to the task of describing the Buddhist project. Buddhism in fact, claims for itself a Realism superior to that of empiricism/materialism. Unyielding scepticism, for its own sake, it considers unrealistic and unhealthy. At the same time the practitioner is not required to 'believe' in Buddhism. Instead the ideal of Enlightenment is proposed as a practical working hypothesis. Its practicability depends upon the context. The following account of the Dharma will attempt to reveal the context of the spiritual life according to Buddhism.

(ii) The Dharma : The word 'Dharma' is derived from a root meaning to support and indeed the word sustains many distinct concepts in Buddhism. Buddhaghosa, an authority of the Hinayana tradition (his name translates as 'Voice of the Buddha') tried more than once to group the various meanings of the term under four main headings. For instance, he proposes that 'dharma' be understood variously as:

- (i) *gune (saddo)*, applied to moral conduct.
- (ii) *desanayam*, to preaching and moral instruction.
- (iii) *pariyattiyam*, to the ninefold collection of the Buddhist scriptures.
- (iv) *nissatte (-njjivate)*, to cosmic (non-animistic) law.

Elsewhere 'dharma' indicates:

- (i) *pariyata*, or doctrine as formulated.
- (ii) *hetu*, or condition, causal antecedent.

(iii) *guna*, or moral quality or action.

(iv) *nissata-nijivata*, the phenomenal as opposed to the 'noumenal'

The above taxonomies take us somewhat closer to a proper understanding of the full breadth of meaning of the term 'dharma'. The fourth categories of each are equivalent, more or less. Buddhism's assertion that noumena do not exist, that nothing exists save thought (*cittamatra*) will be explored in Chapter Three (under 'Subject'). The following will concentrate on dharma, **the** Dharma in the sense of Buddhist doctrine and its practical application.

(a) Conditioned Co-production : Perhaps the concisest formulation of the Buddhist position is that of *pratitya samutpada* (Skt. ; translated by Dr. Beni Madhab Barua as 'causal genesis'; perhaps more satisfactory in Conze's rendering of it as 'Conditioned Co-production'). Without any specific application it has been expressed as follows:

'This being, that becomes, from the arising of this, that arises; this not becoming that does not become; from the ceasing of this, that ceases' (Majjhima - Nikaya 11.32 and Samyutta-Nikaya 11.28; Sangharakshita, 1957, p. 109).

The Buddhist position therefore is simply that conditioned by or in dependence on A there arises B. Conditioned Co-production is coined as such out of an assiduous evasion of the two positions mentioned earlier: that A and B are identical which leads to nihilism; that A and B are different which leads to eternalism. This leaves room for a certain contingency in the relationship between cause and effect. Conditioned Co-production represents an all-inclusive reality that admits of two different trends of things in the universe.

In one of them, the reaction takes place in a cyclical order between two opposites such as pleasure and pain, virtue and vice, good and evil. We refer to this trend, following Buddhaghosa as '*visabhaga-patibhagas*'. The second trend, '*sadisa-patibhaga*', is one in which the reaction takes place in a progressive order between two counterparts or complements, or between things of the same genus, the succeeding factor augmenting the effect of the preceding one, leading incrementally from strength to strength, good to further good, to still greater good, etc. The element of contingency here is the human will. The choice is between continued existence in Samsara, The Round of Conditioned Existence, which partakes of the first trend, and Nirvana, the achievement of which in the second trend is needed in order to preclude the possibility of rebirth. A cursory look at Dhammadinna's system

of *nidanas* (see Appendix 1.1) shows that the Buddhist doctrine of *punabbhava*, 'again becoming' is at work here. Known to the West as reincarnation, this phenomenon presents difficulties to many Westerners who find it simply unbelievable. They are less resistant to the idea when given its proper qualification, that it is not one individual as such that passes at death from one life to a subsequent re-birth; less resistant however because they subscribe to the belief in the individual which Buddhism rejects as an illusion. It should be said moreover that *punabbhava* is not an article of faith in the Christian sense, nor is it considered desirable. Buddhist faith, *sraddha*, derives from a confidence based on experience. Of the Threefold Knowledge, the Buddha claimed to possess as a result of his Enlightenment, the first was his remembrance of numberless past existences as far back as he wished.²

(ii) The Four Noble Truths : The intervention of the human will must take place between the eight and ninth *nidanas*, between thirst and grasping. The space between initial sensation and subsequent craving has been described as the battlefield of the spiritual life; to experience feelings and yet check desires is that victory over oneself, which the Buddha declared to be greater than the conquest of a thousand men, a thousand times in battle. Sangharakshita expresses it thus:

The secret of bondage is also the secret of liberation. By exerting a force stronger than that of hate, stronger than desire, stronger than even ignorance, the Wheel of Becoming can be made to revolve in the opposite direction; the *nidanas* can be enumerated in reverse order .

(1957, p. 134-135).

The eight *nidana*, thirst is also the second Noble/*Aryan* Truth, the Truth of the Origin of Suffering. The fourth Noble Truth, the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering is the spiritual path; its specific content pertains to method rather than doctrine. The prescribed means have been expressed in terms of the Noble Eightfold Way (Appendix 1.2) or of the Six or Ten Perfections or *paramitas* (Appendix 1.3) or in terms of the Three Trainings: Morality (see Appendix 1.4), Meditation and Wisdom. Before concluding, attention should be drawn to the third item of the Noble Eightfold Way, right speech. This is relevant as it relates to the importance of language in the superstructuralist approach. In Buddhism bodily and verbal actions are not regarded as merely supplementary to the personality, but are a true reflection of our subjective selves and judged accordingly. The person is often said to consist of mind, body and speech. Consideration will be given to the importance of Meditation and to various types of meditation practice in Chapters Three and Four.

Conclusion

The thrust of the first chapter has been deliberately Hinayanaic in spirit. The Hinayana or Little Vehicle of Buddhism was represented by a number of the original schools of Buddhism, although the Theravadin School is the only one of them still in existence today. Predominantly analytic and ethico-psychological in character Hinayana Buddhism might also be said to represent the first stages along the spiritual path, since a proper understanding of the basic principles of Buddhism must be arrived at before these principles are put into practice. On its own, the Hinayana is limited. The Path may be said to unfold out into the much broader perspectives of the Mahayana, the 'Great Vehicle' or 'Great Way' which is predominantly devotional-metaphysical in character. Some aspects of the Mahayana development of the teaching will be explored later in Chapter 3. However, an overemphasis on the purely Mahayanistic elements may also be limited. What is required, is a synoptic approach rather than a sectarian approach. The exclusive practice of, for instance Zen, an albeit pragmatic limb of Mahayana Buddhism, is regarded as an effective means of achieving nirvana or *satori* (to give the term its Japanese equivalent); however, the limitations of such a sectarian approach may be exposed when one tries to communicate the essence of Zen to an audience with no grounding in the basics of Hinayana Buddhism. Here misunderstandings are liable to occur. The reference, not a criticism as such, is to one who is broadly recognised as perhaps the most important figure in introducing Buddhism to a contemporary Western audience, Daisetz Suzuki. Suzuki was a major influence on the subject of Chapter Four, Bill Viola. In Chapter Four, the dangers of an eclectic approach to spirituality will be considered, an approach arising out of the attempt to accommodate Buddhism into a (post)Christian context.

Notes:

1. These dates are given by the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa. The dates given by the Culavamsa, a continuation of these texts, diverge from these by about sixty years.
2. The second article of the Buddha's Threefold Knowledge was the claim that with his 'divine eye' (Skt. *divya-caksu*) he could see beings passing away and being reborn according to their Karma and the third claim for the Buddha was that "with the destruction of the *asravas* (biases) of craving for sensuous pleasure, craving for existence and ignorance he had himself attained and realized release of mind and knowledge in this life and abode therein" (Majjhima-Nikaya. 1.482).

Chapter Two - Superstructuralism

Introduction

"It is slowly becoming clear that structuralism, currently out of fashion in the fashion conscious, ever-shifting spotlight of the art-world must be reconsidered. It is vital .. in retrospect the core ideas being expressed there remain important." - Bill Viola (1995, p. 103).

Chapter One saw Buddhism adopt a position between eternalism and nihilism, which it regards as the two basic errors. Chapter Two will give an account of superstructuralism as operating along similar interstitial lines. Superstructuralism in fact stakes out a position between postivism/empiricism (which take the natural world as a given, '*positum*') and the 'I' philosophers Descartes, Kant and Husserl. In fact Superstructuralists see these positions as but two halves of a single error: both agree that things are objective and ideas are subjective; both therefore define a single conceptual dimension i.e. that of 'experience'. Emile Durkheim observed that such philosophies had always posed the epistemological question in terms of the individual human mind. (Harland, 1987, p. 32). Empiricism and the materialistic position on the nature of consciousness are to nihilism (A and B are identical) what the 'I' philosophies and the dualistic conception of consciousness are to eternalism (A and B are different).

Superstructuralism adopted a starting point outside of experience. Inevitably it incurred criticism as 'metaphysical'. As Richard Harland writes, however, "metaphysical philosophy is undoubtedly paradoxical, undoubtedly beyond all common sense; but there is a very real logic to it nonetheless " (1987, p. 76). Harland, in fact identifies superstructuralism as the latest instance of the European tradition of Metaphysical philosophy from Plato, through Spinoza, to Hegel's Objective Idealism. More will be said of contemporary Objective Idealism in Chapter Three. Structuralism's first starting point outside of experience was language (as a self-regulating, self-referential system of signs). Before considering the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in this field, it will be helpful to look at superstructuralism in a broader historical context.

Situating Superstructuralism - Michel Foucault's 'Order of Things' : like his mentor Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault resisted the label 'structuralist' for a long time. Only in the early 1980's did he finally concede to his book *The Order of Things* (1966), its real subtitle : *The Archaeology of Structuralism*. First published in English in 1970, *The Order of Things* he describes as the study of language, the study of economic exchange and the study of living organisms. The book presents us with Foucault's most complete account of what he considers to be the ultimate revelation of 'archaeological' history: the *episteme* (This follows upon the disclosure of the '*lexeme*' (Greimas) and the '*phoneme*' (Jakobson) in structural linguistics, and Levi-Strauss' '*mytheme*' in structural anthropology). An episteme Foucault describes as the social, *a priori*, or hidden structure which determines how knowledge may become manifest in the statements of a particular moment in history. Using these basic units he devised a model of epistemology since the Renaissance of which the following is a simplified account:

The Renaissance episteme was one of 'resemblance': words resembled things, things resembled words. Language in fact was here regarded, according to Foucault, as "part of the world, ontologically interwoven with it" (Harland, 1987, p.110). A key figure to the understanding of this episteme is Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), the Silesian theosophist known as the German philosopher. His belief in the signatures of things granted by the grace of God had popular support at the time. Just as the world was considered a Divine script, so could the will of God, the meaning of the world be 'divined' or read from the objects therein.

An epistemic rupture in the early seventeenth century signals the beginning of the Classical Age of Descartes and Hume. Here words represent things and no longer resemble them. God becomes an absent God, a *Deus Absconditus*. The outside world is captured and re-presented in the mind as if reflected in a mirror. The optical aspects of knowing are foregrounded in this period. Foucault describes Classical Natural History, for example as "nothing more than the nomination of the visible" (Harland, 1987, p. 111).

Another shift or rupture inaugurates the Modern Age. The nineteenth century saw the advent of historical philology which identified the grammatical arrangement of a language as the *a priori* of what can be expressed through it. This represented for Foucault a step in the right direction in so far as the human subject was being revealed

as a function of language, shot through with the same abstract forces as the non-human object. The implied absence of the human subject, fully present to itself, paradoxically and in the nature of Jacques Derrida's 'supplementarity' generated the concept of psychological man as expressed through the 'I' philosophies of Rousseau, Kant, the Phenomenologists and Existentialists. Words now become the tools of self-reference, reflecting the human subject to himself. For Foucault this was a step in the wrong direction, yet it defined the Modern episteme. If the 'premodern' might be compared to a mirror, the 'modern' can be likened to a lamp, the light of which is man's autotelic imagination.

The imperative in the postmodern episteme is to undo this epistemological error. Derrida resolutely urges that we think through the 'end of man'. The abstract forces which first emerged to simultaneously threaten and consolidate this concept 'man' in the nineteenth century, now return more insistently than ever and come initially from the same field, linguistics. These forces cannot be seen to have completely eradicated the subject however. As Jim Collins has said, "the category of the subject remains highly viable in large part because it has never been so hotly contested" (Jencks 1992, p. 115). Two things might be said here, even if it means anticipating some important points in Chapter Three. From the Buddhist perspective, Derrida's exhortation that we think through the 'end of man' doesn't go far enough. Buddhism requires that we **act out** the end of man, via the methods outlined in Chapter One. Also Harland is somewhat critical of the teleological drift in Foucault's model of epistemology, pointing as it does to a condition of knowledge which Foucault evidently approves of. Foucault sees this condition as a kind of monism, involving the collapse of the subject/object distinction, just as Hegel had arrived at monism a century and a half earlier. (But whereas Hegel conceived of it as a kind of Absolute Idea, Foucault's monism is of a kind of absolute density and opacity, thingishness. In this Hegel's position is closer to the Buddhist one. Foucault's position might be compared to that of the Sarvastavadin school of Hinayana Buddhism, no longer practised. They were in irreconcilable conflict with the Mahayanists for their famous doctrine of *sarvam asti* or 'everything exists' from which they derived their name). Harland draws out the distinction between **scientific** materialism and **religious** materialism, the latter characterized by any kind of thought system, which sees not what the world is, but what it must be. As an example, he cites 'Mohammedanism'¹ (1987, p. 100). Although materialism is not the position of most Buddhist schools (the aforementioned Sarvastavadins were exceptional in this respect), Buddhism is a

religion. It would be incorrect to say of it that it sees the world as it must be. Rather it identifies in the world a natural hierarchy of values, insisting that the universe is an ethical one, governed by the laws of karma. Were this not the case spiritual progress would be impossible.

(i) Ferdinand de Saussure : Superstructuralists share the view characteristic of the twentieth century that man is to be defined by his outward language rather than by his inward powers of mind. Ferdinand de Saussure was the first exponent of structuralism, although subsequent structuralists made claims for the work of Marx and Freud as obeying the same imperatives. Essentially it is a method : "It seeks to comprehend *particulars* by describing their interrelationship with the totality of *general* codes which govern them" (Kearney, 1986, p. 240). Saussure, in attempting to uncover the hidden structures in language upon which its articulated speech is predicated (a hidden system he describes as '*langue*'), was pushing back the boundaries of his discipline which traditionally limited itself to the grammatical and philological considerations of speech, '*parole*', previously the starting point for linguistics. (An exhaustive account of Saussurean linguistics would deal with a series of important distinctions ; *langue* and *parole*, signifier and signified, system and realization, semiology and semantics, paradigmatic and syntagmatic, synchrony and diachrony. This account will be confined to a consideration of the first two. Some mention of the paradigm/syntax distinction will be made as adopted in the psychoanalytic approach of Jacques Lacan).

Saussure famously declared that "Language is a form not a substance" (Kearney 1986, p. 240). *Langue* has no substantial existence either in the empirical sense or in the idealist sense. Although it is said to precede particular occasions of *parole*, it is neither the *a posteriori* sum of its parts, nor some *a priori* metaphysical Idea from which all the parts could be deduced. The relationship between the **material** signifier and the **mental** signified (the concept of a thing, as opposed to the referent, the thing itself) is not given by Divine or natural experience. They are different things held together in the mind on a non-perceptual basis and the relationship between them is therefore arbitrary, conventional. Another point of departure for Saussure was his postponement of the whole question of reference (i.e. of how words refer to the empirical or ontological truths outside of language. The question is actively denied by poststructuralists for whom there is no outside of language (*hors texte*)). Saussure was less interested in what meaning is than in how meaning is produced; to explain

this he proposed the principle of differentiation: meaning is not located in the particular positive properties of what is said, but depends on the formal differences between what is said and what is not said. Similarly, Saussure likened signifieds to holes in a net : as concepts they are specified by their boundaries but are empty in themselves.

The principles obtaining in Saussure's work were given a more rigorous application in the linguistic approaches of Benveniste and Jakobson and were subsequently applied to other discourses, to structural anthropology by Durkheim and Claude Levi-Strauss, to Marxism by Althusser, to social, economic and epistemological history by Foucault and to Freud by Jacques Lacan. Lacan's work deserves attention here, and will be dealt with in the next section. Structuralism was beginning to define itself through these theorists as profoundly anti-humanist (the seeds of the so-called dispersal of the subject are evident even in Saussure's work, in which can be seen for the first time the alienating propensities of language); but it was also emerging as profoundly opposed to positivism. In his book *Structural Anthropology*, for instance Levi-Strauss identified a surplus of signifier over signified, the irreducibility of language and the mind to the 'facts' of the empirical world, in other words; a refusal to accept things as given : "the universe is never charged with sufficient meaning the mind always has more meanings available than there are objects to relate to them" (Kearney, 1986, p. 264).

Having said that, the position of the structuralist is not entirely negative. Structuralism opens up the possibility of a third mode of interpreting the world beyond the either/or options of traditional epistemology presented above. For Emile Durkheim, regarding the question of interpretation, the third option manifests as a social *a priori* - interpretation does not proceed from the observations of a subjective observer ; rather it precedes observation, it is always there, structurally inherent in, and imposed by society - here reside Durkheim's 'collective representations'. They avoid the pitfalls beset by innatist philosophies which deem the interpretative classifications, categories, and concepts to be universally fixed/given at birth, and the pitfalls beset by the empiricist philosophies which maintain that these concepts and categories must develop out of personal sensory experience alone.

Equally, for Louis Althusser, regarding the Marxist imperative, it is only man-in-communication, social man who can effectively engage in an ideological struggle.

Althusser dismissed the either/or options of causality beginning in the solid or practical base of the economy and of causality beginning with individual self-determination. "There are no subjects, except by an for their subjection" (Harland, 1987, p. 46). Through an official strategy of divide and control, subjecthood becomes the source not of initiative but of alienation. The superstructuralist priority of society over man is best interpreted as a move towards integration. One of Buddhism's chief imperatives is that the practitioner expand his/her points of contact with the outside world.² The social imperative is continuous with the ethical imperative. If we cease to regard ourselves as discrete subjects and recognize our points of contact with others, the ethical response to others becomes the most rational/realistic response. Ethics is, paradoxically, on a much firmer foundation in this anti-humanist condition of knowledge than it is in the humanist worldview, where ethics are upheld as the humane response, but don't appear to involve consequences beyond that, either in the breach or the observance (unless the ethical breach incurs the painful censure of one's peers and/or is a breach of the law. Althusser and Foucault write compellingly on the subjection of the individual to the ideological constraints imposed by the law).

(ii) Jacques Lacan : Lacan's synthesis of Freud and Saussure was so persuasive that it elevated both structuralism and psychoanalysis to a new level of importance from the 1950's onwards. Briefly stated, his position was that "the unconscious is structured like language" (Kearney 1986, p. 268). He identified an equivalence between the Saussurean *langue/parole* distinction and the Freudian unconscious/conscious division. That the unconscious reality is rhetorical would seem to be supported by the evidence of hypnotic suggestion where words can actually short-circuit sensory experience and produce their own 'reality'. For example the hypnotist can induce someone to eat a lemon by describing it as an apple, and the subject will experience it as an apple. At work here is Derrida's unorthodox logic of the supplement where what's added on later is always liable to predominate over what was there in the first place ; also predicted here is the 'schizo-analysis' of Deleuze and Guattari. It was Freud who originally observed the material properties of language for schizophrenics, how words impact upon them like physical stimuli. The condition is regarded by many psychoanalysts as a linguistic disorder. For Deleuze and Guattari, the schizophrenic is the *homo naturum* of the postmodern age and in no need of a cure as such. The neurotic they regard as the only incurable.

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According to Lacan's model the neurotic symptom arises as a result of an arrest/condensation of the metaphoric function of the unconscious which works according to the paradigmatic laws of association between two similar signifiers. An arrest of the metonymic function on the other hand produces displacement, a fetish. This works upon the syntagmatic rapport between one unconscious signifier and another which, though dissimilar, are associated because of their perceived proximity, because one is an adjunct/attribute of the other. For instance, displacement purely on the level of linguistics can be illustrated by the example of 'Crown' and 'King'. The Crown in fact is nothing like the King and yet is frequently used to describe the monarch, and subsequently displace the King as signifier from the description. The fetish arises according to the same dynamic. Metaphor and metonymy therefore are not merely symbolic devices which re-present the unconscious in some pre-symbolic reality. They are the unconscious reality, the properties inherent in the unconscious. The unconscious works as if by the solid letter of language. It precedes consciousness but cannot be reduced *a posteriori* to the sum of its conscious manifestations, its observable contents. It is defined, rather, by the latency of its linguistic premises. "The subject is spoken rather than speaking", insists Lacan (Kearney, 1986, p. 282).

Lacan's *homo natura* are '*dividua*' or divided ones. There are no individuals. The truth of the self's radical ex-centricity to itself can find full expression only in the symbolic order of the unconscious. Secondary is the construction of the 'specular ego' (L. *speculum* = mirror), an imaginary construct, the seat of the illusion of individual selfhood. Since the ego is an illusion it must be defined by and against something other than itself. According to Lacan, this is precisely what happens. He appealed to embryological evidence to support his proposition that the human being is subject to a very real prematurity of birth. At 6 - 18 months, dubbed 'the mirror-phase' by Lacan, the child invests in an *imago* - an imaginary projection, constructed 'like another' in response to its own biological inadequacy. What's more it is constructed not necessarily according to the child's desire only, but according to the mother's desire also - what she wishes the child to be. Previous to imago construction, the child appears not to differentiate between him/herself and others and will often refer to him/herself in the third person. The child who acquires the other of language acquires the perspective of the 'other' upon the 'I'. The move to the use of the first person pronoun indicates what Charlotte Buhler referred to as *transitivity* (Roussel, New Left Review, Sept-Oct. 1968 No. 51 p. 66); Zen Buddhism uses the

term *klesha*, translated by D.T. Suzuki as "the affective contamination" (Fromm; Suzuki, 1960, p. 20). The self is defined negatively in a differential process. Narcissism, the initial project of self-sufficiency does not precede the relation to the other than self but is in fact produced by it, produced by the relation to the imago. In truth the self is always different from itself in so far as it is beholden to the other. Lacan famously cites Arthur Rimband: *ce je est un autre*, 'the I is another' (Kearney, 1986, p. 274). In 'Function and field of speech and language', *Ecrits*, he writes: "man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other" (Kearney, 1986, p. 275), to be what the 'other' desires. Thereafter desire is endlessly reflected as if in a multitude of mirrors manifesting as the desire to take the place of the 'other' in desire (and love and admire oneself from an external vantage point) and even as the desire for the object of the other's desire (as when a man desires a woman designated 'desirable' by society).

Desire as such can never truly be satisfied. If anything it feeds on and is cultivated by our efforts to satisfy it. The stronger one's ego is, the more painful is the non-satisfaction of desire, however long one succeeds in postponing it. This is the chief point of contact between psychoanalysis and Buddhism. The ultimate non-satisfaction of desire Lacan identifies as the source of the negative 'death-drive' ('*trieb*' as opposed to '*instinkt*') which Freud was striving to comprehend. In fact the parallels between psychoanalysis and Buddhism begin with Freud. Three points of contact could be identified : firstly, there is Freud's concept that knowledge leads to transformation, that theory and practice must not be separated; the second, the fact that he didn't share the high evaluation of our conscious thought system, characteristic of Western man (for example, his use of free association); and thirdly there was his willingness to analyze a person for years. This third point demonstrates that for psychoanalysts, as for Buddhists, the cure does not consist in the absence of illness but in the presence of well-being, and that the establishment of well-being is a project which can involve some time expenditure but which is worthwhile nonetheless. For some Buddhist schools well-being, which they describe as egolessness, is only approached over a number of lifetimes. Egolessness is the ultimate aspiration. Although some Buddhists will describe the aspiration as the expansion of the ego to encompass 'all sentient beings', the 'ego' here escapes its normal categorical confines and the effect is essentially the same. Buddhists will also refer to their project as the production of individuals, in the sense that they are trying to become less susceptible to conditioning - one must become an individual before one can transcend one's individuality.

Ultimately the ego, the individual, the human being are all to be transcended. Lacan was hostile towards the psychoanalytic orthodoxy, the ego analysts who championed the cult of the 'normal man'. Heinz Hartman's book, *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation*, for example was enormously influential in the United States at the time of its publication in the 1950's. For Lacan, this book was little more than a manual for human engineering. The ego analysts saw the well-adjusted personality as one possessed of a strong ego, and thus tried to strengthen the patient's ego, so that he/she would fit into society. Lacan saw the source of the afore-mentioned negative death-drive not in biology but in culture, and in Western culture in particular, given its special emphasis on individuality, selfhood.

Conclusion

In Chapter Two the discussion was confined mainly to the specifically structuralist developments of the superstructuralist movement just as Chapter One confined itself mainly to the language of Hinayana Buddhism. The Third Chapter will deal with the parallels between superstructuralism and Buddhist philosophy at the apogees of their development, between poststructuralism and Mahayana Buddhism.

Notes:

1. Presumably there is no pejorative intent behind Harland's use of this term. Currently, it is considered offensive by many Muslims.
2. The Buddhist meditation practice Metta Bhavana involves the cultivation of compassion/loving kindness towards all sentient beings. It is said to afford the practitioner a feeling of well-being and protection from violence.

Chapter Three - Buddhism and Superstructuralism: The Parallels

Introduction

"Postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined but rather an ideal category or, better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating. We could say that every period has its own postmodernism" - Umberto Eco (Jencks, 1992, p. 73)

It is to the idea of postmodernism as metahistorical category which Umberto Eco subscribes in his postscript to *The Name of The Rose*. Far from being absolutely original, its ways of operating are new only in the sense of never being out of date, applicable as they are to every succeeding discourse deemed relevant within a particular period. In this particular period, Michel Foucault considers their application incomplete. Towards the end of his book *The Order of Things*, he predicts that the thought of the postmodern episteme, when fully realized, will manifest neither as rational knowledge, nor as blind oblivion, but as a kind of mysticism (Harland, 1987, p. 118; not mysticism in the traditional theistic sense of 'union with God'). Forgoing the reservations expressed earlier about the use of the word 'mysticism' in connection with Buddhism, Foucault's prediction provides a window into the following investigation of the parallels between postmodern philosophy and Buddhist philosophy.

Again, it is important to acknowledge the fact that postmodernism doesn't really have anything to contribute to Buddhism and that Buddhist thought is valuable in the postmodern context only to the extent that it remains specifically Buddhist. A poststructural/deconstructive reading of Buddhism is precluded in the sense that Buddhism survives its own 'superstructuralist' analysis, with an important qualification: Buddhists insist on the distinction between absolute truth (Skt. *paramartha-satya*) and relative truth (*samvrtti-satya*) and, for the sake of imparting relative truth, insist upon the normative use of language, geared towards reciprocal understanding¹. Those questions which are not susceptible of logical treatment, on the other hand, are not to be answered. The first two of the undetermined questions enumerated by Buddhism² concern the finitude or infinitude of the universe, the notion of origin in other words. Buddhism's refusal of this notion is one of the most important features distinguishing the 'Perennial philosophy of the East', from its

ephemeral Western counterparts, those philosophical paradigms preceding superstructuralism. These models of philosophy have consistently come undone under superstructuralist analysis because of their speculative premises, their insistent positing of ideas of origin, be they Divine (European Metaphysical tradition : Plato, Spinoza, Hegel³), humanistic (Kant's Transcendental Imagination ; Husserl's Phenomenology) or Semiological (as in Saussure's instigation of the structuralist enquiry). The nomination 'structuralist' indicates the rupture in our ordinary mode of thinking which this refusal of first principles inaugurated. Structures, formerly considered secondary, now take primacy over what once were considered their primary bases. These 'premises' now appear to emerge, in the manner of Derrida's *trace*, from the structural relations obtaining at any given time. This, of course, is the language of conditionality which, as we have already seen, is the language of Buddhism. It isn't surprising that language itself, the most basic structuring device behind all conceptual formulations and all metaphysical or humanist speculations became its own proper focus of enquiry at the beginning of the superstructuralist movement.

(i) Language: Mention has been made above of what might be described as Buddhism's own 'deconstruction' of itself. This was conducted by Nagarjuna in the second century C.E. The second generation Western Buddhist teacher Kulananda, towards the end of his book *Western Buddhism* (1997), to some extent suggests the feasibility of this thesis with his reference to the 'resonances' between Nagarjuna and the thinking of Jacques Derrida. Kulananda does not elaborate upon these resonances, moreover, he insists that Nagarjuna has meant many things to different people (read as a Platonic/Kantian transcendentalist by Schopenhauer, for instance, and as a logical analyst by the early twentieth century Western positivist philosophers), most of whom failed to take into account the fact that Nagarjuna was not just a thinker but primarily a religious practitioner. That said, if the postmodern deconstructive imperative is viewed as precisely that, as a method, perhaps the age-old philosophy/practice divide becomes less of an obstacle to the present enquiry. An exploration of the resonances between Nagarjuna and Derrida unearths some compelling similarities.

Nagarjuna for his propagation of the Prajnaparamita Sutras ('Scriptures of Perfect Wisdom') and his written commentaries thereon (most notably the Mula-Madhyamika

Karikas), is regarded as the second founder of Buddhism. His work represents a crystallization of the thought of the Madyamika School of Mahayana Buddhism.

Reference has been made already to Buddhism's four undetermined questions. Nagarjuna's dialectic can be seen as the logical equivalent of the Buddha's famous 'silence' with regard to these questions⁴. The Buddha's 'response' actually incorporated all four exhaustive modes of predication possible (that A is B; A is not B; A both is and is not B; A neither is nor is not B). Applied to the fourth question of the post-mortem state of the *Tathagata*, or Enlightened Being, for instance, the response could be issued as follows: To say that the *Tathagata* exists after death is inadequate; to say that he does not exist is inadequate; to say that he both exists and does not exist, or that he neither exists nor does not exist is also inadequate (examples will be given later of the 'undecidables' in Derrida's *Grammatology*, irreducible to the either/or logic of Western Metaphysics to which he responds by positing the exact same predicates). The *Tathagata's* condition after the dissolution of his physical body transcends thought. Hence the Buddha's rejection of all philosophical views (*drsti*). Nagarjuna demonstrated that all such views are inapplicable because they are inherently self-contradictory.

His dialectic differs from that of Socrates in that the Socratic method invokes a number of propositions, each one logically inferred from the preceding one until finally a position is arrived at which contradicts the first proposition; Nagarjuna does not come up with any proposition to counter the first. Rather he draws out the self-contradictory nature of all propositions taken to their logical conclusions. The concept of Being for instance will involve the conception of non-Being. This mechanism can be seen at work, for example, in Hegel's *Jena Logic*, one of the objects of Derrida's deconstruction. If the concept of Being is understood to an extreme whereby a thing simply is and is not whatever nouns or adjectives might be applied to it, we arrive at a concept of Being which indicates pure contentless 'is'-ness. This of course is an oxymoron. Contentlessness automatically produces the concept of Nothing. Hence Heidegger's habit of crossing out the word 'Being', placing it under erasure ('*sous rature*'), wherever he inscribed it in his later writings. Derrida approves of this position so far.

It is Hegel's attempt to resolve the contradiction by moving into a third term ('Becoming', he proposes in the case of case of 'Being' and 'Nothing'), which has no

place in Derrida's model because it signals the return of speculative dialectics. Instead Derrida posits 'undecidable' terms, which can "no longer be included within the philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics", (*Positions* 1962; Kearney 1986, p. 125). Any glossary of Derrida's deconstructive terms themselves - *differance*, archi-writing, trace, supplement, palimpsest, dissemination, erasure, etc. may be said to consist, of such undecidable terms. In the case of the term *differance* for instance - there is no 'other' against which the difference implied can define itself - the full implications of the term point to a situation of meaning endlessly deferred, of radical 'alterity'. Derrida's own account of the erasure of the 'trace' in *Of Grammatology* is as follows: "The trace is not only the disappearance of the origin ... it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin" (Kearney, 1986, p. 124). The trace therefore cannot be said to be the origin, the non-origin or both or neither. This basically amounts to a recognition that the object of the deconstruction/negation in deconstructive linguistics is itself a negation. It is a position that heralds the end of philosophy, dispensing as it does with the three so-called Laws of Thought, the three principles of Aristotelian logic which can be traced back to the source of Western Metaphysics and indeed any field dependent on reason. They are as follows:

- (i) The Law of Identity: A is A; it cannot be not A; it is identical with itself.
- (ii) The Law of Contradiction: A is not not-A
- (iii) The Law of the Excluded Middle: A either is or is not B; meaning that between the two contradictory statements there is no middle ground. If one is denied, the other must be affirmed.

The limitations of these three principles are demonstrated by Nagarjuna in the *Karikas*. He goes so far as to include among the targets of his critique those most important categories of Buddhist thought Conditioned Co-production and Nirvana. Conditioned Co-production, as described earlier, presents a system of causality which states simply that conditioned by or in dependence on A there arises B. Closer analyses actually reveals this not to be a philosophical position at all. Only four possible views can be posited on the relationship between cause and effect. Nagarjuna deconstructs them as follows:

(a) That cause and effect are identical, a view technically known as *satkaryavada*, a view held at the time by the Samkhya School of Buddhism, the representative Brahminical view of causation : if cause and effect were identical then no distinction could be made between them, rendering the proposition an instance of occasionalism, the denial of causation.

(b) That cause and effect are different, *asatkaryavada*, a representative Hinayana view, upheld by the Sarvastivadins and the Sautrantikas : if cause and effect are different no relationship subsists between them and anything can be produced out of anything. One of the corollaries of this position is that the cause ceases to exist upon the production of the effect. This too introduces the theory of causality into the realms of the unthinkable. The Sarvastivadins also maintained that the effect could be produced not by one cause only, but by a number of factors. Nagarjuna's argument against this second thesis suggests that if a number of factors were by necessity involved in co-operation to produce an effect, then a successive additional factor would be needed to co-ordinate the original number, and for the co-ordination of this additional factor with the original number, another causal component would be needed and so on *ad infinitum*.

(c) That cause and effect are both identical and different : beyond the obvious contradiction in terms, this position is beset with the same problems as both the first and the second.

(d) That cause and effect are neither identical nor different : this is not a philosophical position.

The only reason *pratitya samutpada* survives Nagarjuna's critique is because it avoids the four positions outlined above. It cannot be said to have absolute validity as a theory of causation, however, since it has no premises ; it is not a philosophical position. This, on the other hand, is consistent with the Buddha's eschewal of all views (*drsti*). Also the relative applications of Conditioned Co-production still hold good even in the aftermath of Nagarjuna's critique. The practice of morality, concentration and wisdom for instance will introduce one into the second set of *nidanas* enumerated by Dhammadinna (*sadisa-patibhaga*) just as surely as the neglect of the Spiritual Path will prolong one's existence on the Wheel of Becoming, the first set of *nidanas* (*visabhaga-patibhagas*), Samsara. Equally the Spiritual Life does not

depend on answers to the undetermined questions. In short, Absolute Truth can only be aspired to in dependence on relative truth.

In the twenty-fifth chapter of the Karikas, Nagarjuna addresses the subject of Nirvana. The selection of the following verses for quotation are based on their correspondences to the four modes of predication:

VI

If Nirvana is Ens
How can it lack substratum?
There whatsoever is no Ens
Without any substratum.

VII

Now if Nirvana is a non-Ens
How can it then be independent?
For sure an independent non-Ens
Is nowhere to be found.

XI

If Nirvana were both Ens and non-Ens,
Final deliverance would also be both,
Reality and Unreality together
This never could be possible!

XVI

If Nirvana is neither Ens nor non-Ens
No one can really understand
The doctrine which proclaims at once
Negation of them both together.

(Stcherbatsky's translation; Sangharakshita, 1957, p. 348-350)

Nagarjuna's primary intention was to demonstrate the falsehood of the Sarvastivadin and the Sautrantika positions with regard to Nirvana, the details of which need not be presented here. It will suffice to say that the Hinayana had a tendency towards the use of negative terms in relation to Nirvana (e.g. *nirodha*, 'extinction') to distinguish it

from the positive observable contents of Samsara. Negative predicates however are as inadequate as positive ones when confronted with the ineffable. Implied in Nagarjuna's critique is the falsehood even of differentiating between Samsara and Nirvana. From the perspective of Enlightenment the distinction between them no longer obtains, nor are they regarded in terms of existence or non-existence. *Sunyata* ('emptiness') is the only term which approximates to a description of their nature/non-nature.

The temptation in this thesis is to try to identify in Derrida's undecidables a term equivalent to *sunyata*. This is to be resisted however. At such an abstract level we must recognise that Buddhism and poststructuralism are two very different things. The term *sunyata* is intended by the Madhyamikas to indicate the transcendental reality. Language is not reduced to complete obsolescence in the face of the transcenatental. The Prajnaparamita Sutras in particular have recourse to the use of systematic paradox; not paradox in the merely rhetorical sense of the term where the contradiction is only apparent and the intended truth could quite easily be stated logically, but a paradox *per se*, one which attempts to express in terms of logical contradictions that which transcends thought. Derrida's speculation as to the nature of the 'transcendental' might help to situate the poststructuralist position in relation to the Buddhist one in this regard: "The originally Differance of the absolute Origin is perhaps what has always been said through the concept of the 'transcendental'" (Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*; Kearney, 1986, p. 129-130) For Derrida, as for all superstructuralists, language constitutes the human world and the human world constitutes the whole world. There is nothing outside language. Poststructuralist paradox, and the postmodern derivatives, parody/'sarcasm' constitute an unnaturally subversive position on the margins of language which can at least stave off the naturalized register of authority. This is its ethical imperative.

(ii) The Subject : Chapter One and Two dealt individually with the Buddhist and structuralist positions on the subject. Perhaps the Buddhist position requires further commentary now. We could begin by referring to a particularly instructive passage from Sangharakshita's essay *The Religion of Art* which deserves quotation at some length:

In spite of its negative form the word egolessness.... is far from devoid of positive content .. our effort to reveal that content may well begin with an explanation of the principle which it negates. This principle strange to say is in truth itself a negation, a suppression of reality ... The ego does not really exist; it is ... not a metaphysical entity but an epistemological error. It is simply the idea of separate individuality. Since ideas are themselves things (not

in the sense of being material objects but in the sense that they are capable of producing tangible effects), the idea of individuality does not remain ineffectually floating about in the ether of consciousness but descends upon the earth in a storm of consequences. Being a wrong idea it produces effects which are wrong. The first of these effects is the attraction and aggregation of material particles into a human body (1988, p. 85).

This is an excellent account of the Buddhist position. 'Man', the concept which Foucault considered the category mistake of the Modern period is replaced here by man, the effect, the very real consequence of a far more fundamental 'epistemological error', the concept of individuality. Sangharakshita's formulation attributes objectivity to ideas, an objectivity which is not the objectivity of things, and identifies a kind of idea which is not the idea of the subjective mind. The wrong idea of individuality actually precedes and produces the wrong effect of the subjective mind. It is an Objective Idealism of the same order which allows superstructuralists to give language categories such a primary and self-sufficient status, and which explains Lacan's remark that "it was certainly the Word that was in the beginning". He adds: "we live in its creation but it is the action of our spirit that continues this creation by constantly renewing it .. it is the world of words that creates the world of things" ('Function and field of speech and language', *Ecrits*; Kearney, 1986, p. 280).

This is almost a re-presentation of the Buddhist doctrine of *cittamatra*, that nothing exists except thought and that what we perceive as 'objects' are merely thoughts made manifest, not objective realities. Buddhism prescribes a twofold method for destroying delusional belief in 'noumena', which forms the basis of many meditation practices:

(i) the spatio-analytical method : This involves the progressive analysis of phenomenon-as-fact, the 'object' into ever smaller constituent parts. It is thus discovered to be infinitely divisible; its only nature is its non-nature. The same process can be applied to the individual which is not indivisible at all and is traditionally broken down into the five 'heaps' (Skt. *Skandhas*) of *rupa* (body, form, materiality), *vedana* (feeling, sensation), *samjna* (perception), *samskarah* (complexes, impulses, karma formations or volitions) and *vijnana* (consciousness).

(ii) the dynamic-synthetical method : This resolves the phenomenon-as-event into the sum of its external relations (Indra's Net is a symbolic device used in the

dynamic-synthetical method. An explanation of it will be given at the end of the chapter).

The insights these methods can afford have important implications for the field of visual art. Previously the emphasis was on the re-presentation of some original presence. Kulananda expresses the new emphasis as follows: "To see anything as it really is, is to see it as an image. There are no 'things', all we have are momentary representations, fleeting significations generated within the great flux of conditions ... The arts at their best present images *as images*" (1997, p. 215-216). We will turn specifically to aesthetic considerations in Chapter Four.

The idea of original presence (*logos*) is undone in the critique of Jacques Derrida and specifically subjective presence is denied in his deconstruction of Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology. Claude Levi-Strauss saw religions functioning as "machines for the suppression of time" (Kearney, 1986, p. 264). Derrida identified this as the function at work in any perception of a 'living present'. Temporal distinctions are suppressed through memory, our retention of a past trace (which is no longer) and through anticipation, a temporal 'protention' of a future trace (which is not yet). Our awareness of ourselves as discrete subjects resides in the suspension (or to use Derrida's term, the *differance*) of temporal differences. This suspension can be regarded as a primary instance of grasping (*upadana*), the ninth *nidana* (see Appendix 1.1.) arising out of the eight *nidana* thirst (*trsna*), in this case the thirst for self-identity/self-presence. Derrida says of desire that it "carries in itself the destiny of its own non-satisfaction" (Kearney, 1986, p. 128) It therefore results in suffering. An alternative frame of reference for these basic insights we have already seen in the first two of Buddhism's Four Aryan Truths, The Truth of Suffering and The Truth of the Origin of Suffering. It would be incorrect to describe the Dharma as a machine for the suppression of time given its insistence that all conditioned things are subject to change. Of course the Truths of the Cessation of Suffering and the Path leading to that Cessation, the specifically Buddhist content of the Four Aryan Truths are beyond the sphere of Derrida's authority.

Conclusion: Mallarme's Lustre & Indra's Net

The living present is a re-presentation of no original presence. It is a mimesis with no determinable origin. It is sustained only by its constant reappearance in memory,

which, for Plato fulfilled the dual function of internal scribe (*grammateus*) and painter (*zographos-demiourgos*). They might be said to represent our experience faithfully, except in every respect. One can no longer trust one's ideas and yet one cannot get down from them either. As obstacles they cannot be overcome but must be transcended.

The postmodern condition of knowledge, of the mime without origin is anticipated by Mallarmé's metaphor the *lustre*, a chandelier with multiple glass pendants endlessly reflecting each other, which could also act as a metaphor for the intricate play of desire described by the Lacanian 'mirror-phase'. Product of a culture geographically and historically distant from Mallarmé's, the metaphorical Indra's Net stretches infinitely in all directions. At each intersection of its threads is embedded a diamond and reflected on the surface of each is every other diamond in the Net; and their reflections' reflections, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Every particle in the universe thus described might be said to be in instantaneous, faster than light communication with all of the others.

Notes:

1. Jurgen Habermas in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, is right to defend the importance of consensual and normative statements issuing from the dialogical qualities of human communication (Jencks, 1992, p. 309). At the same time however one should not lose sight of the facts as revealed to us by poststructuralism: that language has its functional limitations; and the function moreover is not necessarily the locus of the 'truth' or 'reality' of language.
2. Buddhism enumerates four undetermined questions (Skt. *avyakrtavastuni*) in all. The third concerns the identification of the vital principle (*jiva*) with the body (*sarira*). The fourth concerns the nature of the *Tathagata* after death.
3. "It is the Geist-ly side of Hegel that Althusser most objects to... The Superstructuralists shed the religious baggage ... signs and language categories are communicated between individual human minds rather than lying behind them" - Richard Harland (1987, p. 75)
4. The subtle nature of his teaching has give rise to a popular saying amongst Chinese and Japanese Mahayanists that from the day of his Enlightenment to the day of his final passing away the Buddha did not utter a single word.

Chapter Four - Bill Viola

Introduction

"If postmodernist practice in the arts has provoked controversy and debate, it is because of what it does (or does not do), not because of what it is. In other words it is as an object 'to be read', an intervention in the sense of an action requiring a response, rather than as an object of descriptive poetics." - Susan Rubin Suleiman (Jencks, 1992, p. 320)

Postmodernist art derives its functional principle from what Charles Jencks has described as 'double-coding', the combination of cultural idioms, past and present. Hence postmodern retroactivity. The past is no longer suppressed in favour of the present (Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge was designed to expose and undermine this characteristically modernist bias). Susan Rubin Suleiman's reference to what it does or does not do, describes for postmodern art either an active function or a negative function (the passivity of 'art for art's sake' has no place in the postmodern scheme of things). For instance, the standard interpretation of the doubly-coded postmodern art-object which juxtaposes two completely dissimilar cultural idioms is that it is demonstrating the multiplicity of perspectives opened out by the dispersal of the subject/'the death of the author'. Such pastiche has a negative function. What it **does not do** is allow any one perspective a position of privilege/authority (it derives from the poststructuralist use of paradox/parody and defines a certain ethical dimension to postmodern cultural practice; see Chapter Three).

Perspectivism should not equal value-relativism, an "anything goes" attitude to aesthetic or ethical judgements, but value-relativism is too often what is demonstrated in postmodern cultural practice. In *The Will to Believe*, William James suggests that, biologically considered, "our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as veracity" (Jencks, 1992, p.204). This mechanism is behind the "new gnosticism" which Ihab Hassan identifies in art and science, based on people's willingness to buy into what he describes as "heuristic fictions" (Jencks, 1992, p.198): in the absence of dominant criteria, people will invent their own worldview out of disparate cultural phenomena, and continue to function in language even in the wake of poststructuralism. The only difference now is that there is a certain knowingness or irony, certainly a lack of

innocence in today's exercise of language and in the double-coding of postmodern art objects.

The work of American video artist, Bill Viola, is a noteworthy exception in the postmodern art-world for its lack of ironic content. His work is more hybrid than pastiche because of the real correspondences between the various sources he draws upon. His work indeed is multiply-coded, integrating mysticism, poetry, shamanism, Taoism, Sufism, and Zen Buddhism, along with Western metaphysics and its culmination (according to Richard Harland) in superstructuralism - all of which are orientated towards a profounder understanding of the nature of reality, the same reality which postmodern perspectivism seeks to disclose. So far, this thesis has been given over to an exploration of the parallels between Buddhism and postmodernism, the relevance of the 'perennial philosophy of the East' to the postmodern condition, and even of postmodernism itself as a metahistorical category, a way of operating that is new only in the sense of never being out of date (see Chapter Three, Introduction). This chapter will present the work of Bill Viola as a case study; an art practice which demonstrates the relevance of Buddhism to the postmodern condition. The extent to which the work represents a successful integration of the two will also be considered.

Bill Viola's is one of just three names (the others are those of Nam June Paik and Gary Hill) that have come to represent video as an artform. In the twenty-five years since he produced his first videotape (*Wild Horses*, 1972), Viola (b.1951) has issued a substantial body of video works and installations. For Otto Neumaier it represents a whole, a work in progress, released in singular instalments (Puhlinger, 1994, p. 78). An exploration of the artist's project is needed before a description of the work itself. Viola is interested in what art **does**. The functional intent of his work can be regarded as a measure of its 'postmodernity'. His main concern is with the affective/conative potential of visual imagery, the transformative effect that it can have on the individual audience member, in other words. He relates his position as follows: "A gift [as in Marcel Mauss' theory identifying the gift/obligation contract as the first form of value-exchange relationship entered into by man] is only a gift if the person receiving it can use it. This is the essence of the whole equation. It is the reason why all artworks, to be art must be functional... Functional in the original sense of art, in the sense of ritual" (Viola, 1995, p.281-282). Buddhist art is similarly functional but is primarily Buddhist and only secondarily art. For a Buddhist's understanding of creative activity in general, reference could be made to Sangharakshita's essay 'The Religion of Art'

which outlines a secular approach to the use of art as a means to emotional/spiritual development, practicable by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. The definition of art contained therein is as follows: "Art is the organization of sensuous impressions into pleasurable formal relations that express the artist's sensibility and communicate to his audience a sense of values that can transform their lives" (1988, p.97-98). Viola, on the other hand, does not see the transformative function of art as an aesthetic function: "I consider art to be a branch of knowledge, not a function of pleasure. Pleasure or taste leads from the senses. Aesthetics is essentially sensationalist. The Greek word aesthetics means perception by the senses" (Note, January 11, 1991; Viola, 1995, p.182). Such a distaste for aesthetics should not be thought of as a prerequisite for postmodernity. As Linda Hutcheon points out, "the theorists/practitioners of postmodernism in all the arts, from Umberto Eco to Karlheinz Stockhausen are emphatic in their commitment to the formulation (or recollection) of a more generally shared aesthetic code" (Jencks, 1992, p.81). The problems arising out of Viola's rejection of aesthetics will be considered later.

The following attempt at a synopsis of his work divides Viola's career into three periods:

1972-1976: this period the artist himself describes as "didactic: the content was the medium" (Puhlinger, 1994, p. 200). In these early experimental videotapes, Viola was interested in exploring the properties of human perception and of the technology with which he was working. For example, *Information* (1973) records the aberrant electronic effects discovered when a videotape recorder was accidentally plugged, via a studio switcher, back into itself. Despite the absence of a signal, there is colour. There is sound where there is no audio connection. This white noise finds its way into some of his later works eg. *Pneuma* (1994). Though important in terms of the artist's development, the tapes prior to 1976 have little significance in terms of Viola's subsequent thematic and stylistic concerns.

1976-1991: Marie Luise Syring sees Viola as having evolved "a visionary documentary style" since 1976 (Puhlinger, 1994, p.200). The thematic preoccupations of his current work can be traced back to the videos collected under the title of *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-1980). Raymond Bellour, in interview with Viola (*October*, no. 34, Autumn 1985), uses this collection and makes reference in particular to the title piece (see Fig. 1) in order to situate the work. In this seven-

minute tape the camera is fixed on a visual field with a pool of water in the foreground and a forest in the background. A man emerges from the trees and approaches the water's edge. Suddenly, he makes a forward leap. At this point in the editing process Viola splits the screen into foreground and background. While the water's surface continues to undulate on the lower half of the screen, a freezing of the action on the upper half sees the man's body in suspension over the surface of



Fig. 1. *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-80)

the water. Eventually, his body fades out against the background. Moments later, the same body emerges, naked from the water, climbs onto dry land and retreats back into the forest. Viola identifies the frozen action as the key element in the piece: "There is a transformation that's based on the original decision to give up; I think it relates to death in some way or letting go of the things that you know... I was trying to get at the original notion of baptism... and the idea of breaking through illusion" (ibid., p.97).

In another piece of *The Reflecting Pool* series, *Ancient of Days* (1979-1981) Viola toys with the 'real-time' of videotape recording. The tape features footage of a table and chair burning (see Fig. 2), but shown in reverse, so that they appear to reconstruct themselves out of the flames and ashes. Bellour comments that while many artists use special effects to get away from realistic images, Viola's tapes almost give an impression of reality. "of spatial and temporal continuity" (ibid., p.100). This spatial and temporal continuity is demonstrated more by an installation like *Passage* (1987), in which a twenty minute tape of a two-year-old's birthday party is slowed down so dramatically that it can be played through just once in one day. Andrew Renton has pointed out that the use of the phrase 'real-time', in relation to video, is not without irony. He identifies in Viola's pieces "a strength in unflinching, fixed observation over time. In a sense, that reality [real-time] is confirmed more by the non-event, by nothing very much happening, than by significant moments or turning-points" (*Flash Art*, 175, March/April 1994, p.102).



Fig. 2. *Ancient of Days* (1979-81)

For example, *Chott El-Djerid [A Portrait in Light and Heat]* (1979) features scenes of the Tunisian Sahara Desert Landscape in sustained observation over thirty minutes. More recently, *Deserts* (1994) deals with the same kind of setting. Viola's work tends to operate between the poles of *nature mordante* and *tableau vivante*, but the appeal is always to human consciousness. Whenever the human body is absent from the work it is so, conspicuously. The artist does not consider the lifeless space of the desert negative. He considers it positive because it is emblematic of the "inner space of mind no telescope can reach" (*Art Forum*, 33, May 1995, p.87). One of Ihab Hassan's 'definiens' of reconstructive postmodernism is 'immanence', which he describes as referring, "without religious echo, to the growing capacity of mind to generalise itself through symbols" (Jencks, 1992, p.184), as prefigured by Lacan's symbolic order of the unconscious. It is in this sense that Celia Montolio describes Viola's closeness to nature as 'metonymic' (Puhlinger, 1994, p.184) (metonymy is afforded priority over metaphor in postmodernism, schizophrenia over paranoia - while the metaphor has a tendency to 'ground' itself in a concrete 'signified' or paranoiac 'symptom', metonymy describes the constant shifting of reference between two or more 'signifiers'). The artist has expressed an interest in the creation myths of aboriginal peoples, as examined in the Structural Anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss. The animals shown in the slow-motion footage of *I Do Not Know What It Is That I Am Like* (1986-1989) are invested with an almost totemic quality, each a symbol of a particular aspect of human consciousness/temperament. Indeed, Viola seems to have selected for the tape footage of animals traditionally used as North American totems: owls, bison, etc. There is a metonymic shift away from anthropomorphism which reflects Buddhism's preference for referring to 'all sentient beings' where the Occidental emphasis has always been on 'man'.

1991 onwards: 1991 saw Viola's last autonomous videotape to date, *The Passing*, although the imagery contained therein has been re-used and developed throughout many of his subsequent video-installations (Viola's installation work is described by Donald Kuspit as *Gesamtkunstwerke*, postmodern maximalism at its most engulfing and inclusive, drawing together architecture, sculpture, flat imagery, sound theatre, and above all the individual spectator; *Art Forum*, 32, September 1995, p.204). The opening image of *The Passing*, a man's body submerged in water is in fact reinterpreted most recently in *The Messenger* (1996), a large scale video projection piece commissioned for Durham Cathedral (see Fig. 3.1 and Fig. 3.2) and last shown in Dublin's Douglas Hyde Gallery. The image of 'almost drowning' is the principal



Fig. 3.1: *The Messenger* (1996)

motif of Viola's work, his most effective and **affective** image. Kuspit describes it as "radical... reaching to the roots of the being" (*Art Forum*, 32, September 1993, p.145). It is important to recognise here that Bill Viola regards his work as belonging to a tradition of sublime art, where 'sublime' is understood as in its original sense of something which goes to the limits of what it is possible for human beings to experience (Viola, 1995, p.276). The most obviously liminary states of human experience are, of course, birth and death, the beginning and the end of human existence. Ihab Hassan points to one aspect of deconstructive postmodernism as residing in the 'unpresentable'/'unrepresentable', as in the Kantian Sublime. The danger he sees in this challenge to representation, instigated by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of presence, is the likelihood of its leading the artist to "other liminal states: the Abject, for instance rather than the Sublime, or Death itself" (Jencks, 1992, p.196). Kuspit relates this danger specifically to Viola's project, claiming that "to know the sensory-affective fundamentals of existence is to risk being destroyed by it" (*Art Forum*, 32, September 1993, p.145). Further consideration will be given to Viola's *Via Negativa* later, as it relates to the Buddhist project of negating the ego.

In *The Passing*, Viola uses some intensely private footage. Ostensibly, the tape is about the death of his mother and the birth of his son, two events which closely coincided. Subsequent works have used the same footage: *Heaven and Earth* (1992; Fig. 4) and, controversially *The Nantes Triptych* (1992) in which video recordings of his wife giving birth and of his mother on her death bed are shown to the left and right of another submerged body. Variations on the submerged body motif include *The Arc of Ascent* (1992), *The Sleepers* (1992; Fig. 5), and *Stations* (1994, Fig. 6). The emotional sting in much of Viola's work, along with his eclecticism, presents a problem for many art critics. Sean Cubit has pointed out how repeated attempts at interpretation have degenerated into the use of "abstract nouns and impressionistic adjectives" (*Screen* 32:2, Summer 1995, p.114) no longer current in contemporary media theory. Words like 'grace', 'awe' and 'beauty' may have their place in a critique of Viola's work but the specifically aesthetic is secondary to the artist's project. His explicit denial of any aspiration towards an aesthetic has already been mentioned. One gets the impression that many critics, fazed by the 'mystical' register of his work will automatically respond to it favourably. Not that much of the work doesn't merit a favourable response. But when that response is of the order of Maria Vetrocq's reaction to *Stations* (1994) which she summed up as "Viola's awful conflation of birth and death and sex and absence and everlasting dreaming" (*Art in America*, 83, May

1995, p.46), the work is effectively occupying a critical vacuum. The following account will present the work as it relates to superstructuralism and Buddhism under the respective headings of 'Deconstructing Presence' and 'Viola's *Via Negativa*'.

(i) Deconstructing Presence: Louis Althusser conceded an importance to what he described as 'real art', that which is not necessarily reducible to ideological deformations, provided that it is rescued by the right readings. One of the most sophisticated readings of Bill Viola's work is constituted by a number of articles by Donald Kuspit who identifies the issue of presence as the key to understanding Viola's artworks. The artist's insistence that he is working within a branch of knowledge makes it entirely appropriate to examine how the work relates to the latest 'condition of knowledge'. In particular the following will attempt to relate Viola's work to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of presence.

Mentioned in the third chapter was Claude Levi-Strauss' description of religion as a "machine for the suppression of time". He identified art, also as such a 'machine'. This function can well be appreciated in traditional static visual art, the painting or the sculpture which captures and reflects a moment in time. Video, on the other hand, is a medium with a much more obvious existence in time. There is no deferral of temporal differences, one image succeeds the next. Watching Viola's nightmarish *Anthem* (1983), for instance, the viewer is presented with a series of disturbing images: violence in nature, destruction of the environment, invasive surgery, all to the sound accompaniment of a high-pitched scream, drawn out over the entire length of the tape. According to Donald Kuspit, "Viola's videos, though harrowing, seem to self-destruct in the process of being shown - they are an immaterial visual stream, Styx and Lethe rolled into one - so there is no object to destroy, only an effect to work through" (*Art Forum*, 32, September 1993, p.145). Derrida's terminology could quite easily be applied to this process: each succeeding image places the previous image under erasure (*sous rature*).

More often however, it is through the use of sustained observations that Viola deconstructs the idea of presence. Kuspit draws attention to a sequence in *Hatsu Yume [First Dream]* (1981) in which the camera is held for some time on what appears to be a huge monolith in a desert landscape (see Fig. 7). The sustained shot enables the monolith to function as a potential support for concentration/meditation (*samadhi*), a support which Buddhists might describe as a *kammatthana*, literally a

'place of work' (anything, any material or mental object may serve as the external basis for one-pointedness of mind - for a complete account of the forty kammattanas traditionally recommended, see Appendix 1.5). Richard Harland, in fact, teases out a very interesting, if somewhat imperfect analogy between Derrida's writings and meditation: "It is not by chance that Derrida often speaks of meditating and meditations in his writings" (1987, p.150). The following summarises Harland's analogy point by point:

- a.) First of all, Meditation begins with any object or a special type of word. Harland writes that the word is "typically a word without ordinary meaning" or one "that loses its ordinary meaning by being repeated over and over again" (ibid.). (It can however be argued that many Buddhist mantras do have specific devotional meaning or refer to specific doctrines.) Harland continues: "For the purposes of meditation, natural object and human word are in essentially the same condition... The word is nothing more - and the object nothing less - than a *signifier*. Which is precisely the condition that Derrida attributes to the trace" (ibid.).
- b.) Harland next invokes Derrida's concept of 'dissemination', describing how, for the meditator "a pebble or a word can generate meaning without ever referring to any particular thing or inspiring any particular mental content. For the meditator, meaning is an infinite implication that can reach out to 'mean' the whole universe" (ibid.).
- c.) "In the third place," according to Harland, "meditation works by absence, by negativity... the meditator concentrates on a pebble or a word in order to empty the mind of all other contents," producing what Derrida refers to, in *Writing and Difference* (1978), as this "essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear to be produced out of language" (ibid., p.151).
- d.) Lastly, Harland suggests that meditation does not involve directed activity on the part of the subject: "Hence the value of meditation as an antidote to the self-centred, goal-oriented ego. The meditator must learn how *not* to strive and grasp, must learn how to let go and open up the mind and surrender control" (ibid.). Thus control is surrendered to the real being of the 'Sign'.

The one respect in which Harland's analogy is flawed is in its ascribing too passive a role to the meditator. Meditation, if practiced incorrectly as merely 'letting go' /relaxation is liable to produce torpor in the meditator which is precisely the opposite of what meditation is designed to achieve. Rather it is an active attempt to achieve heightened concentration; it is difficult and requires no small expenditure of energy.



Fig. 4. *Heaven and Earth* (1992)

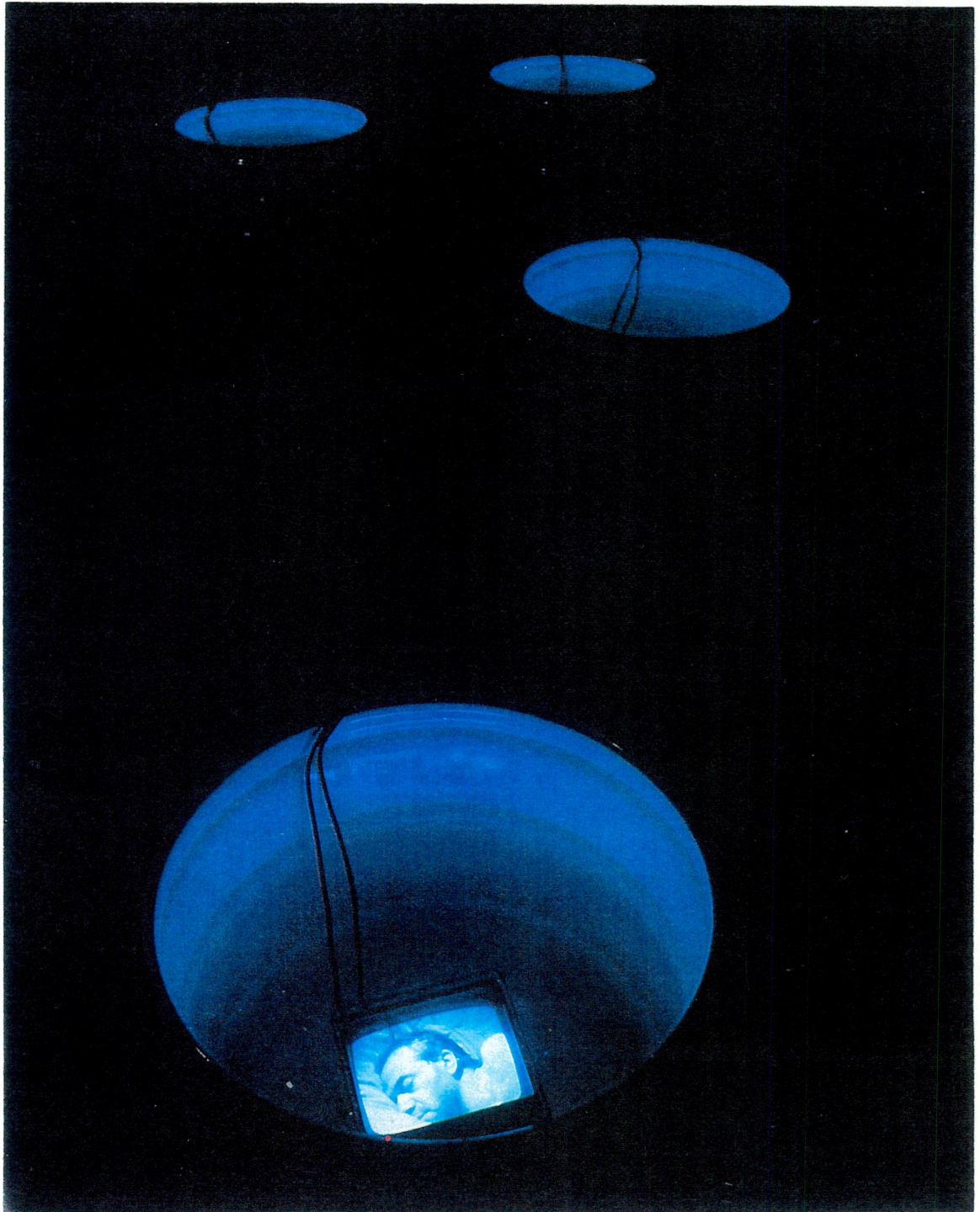


Fig. 5. *The Sleepers* (1994)

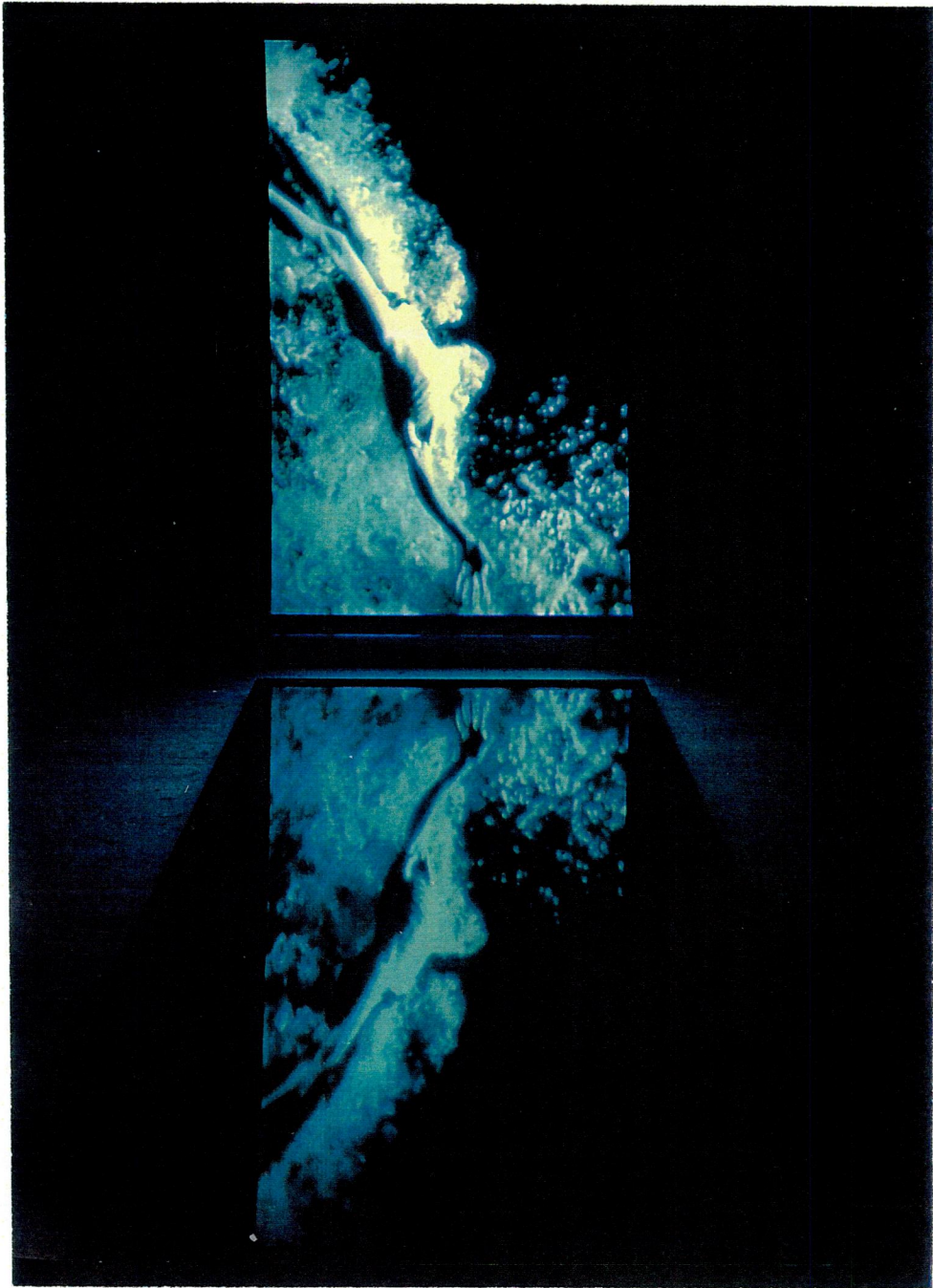


Fig. 6. *Stations* (1994)

Meditation is best understood simply as 'concentration', rather than as implying some kind of 'infinite meaning'. Of course, Harland is right that as an activity it is an extremely valuable antidote to egotism. But again it is important to stress that a certain activity is involved; that one must become an individual before individuality is transcended; that, as stated earlier, one must *act out*, rather than think through 'the end of man'.

Returning once again to Viola's sustained shot of the rock in *Hatsu Yume*, Sangharakshita describes the potential benefits of such sustained observation: "When an object is observed intently for some time sympathy for it will begin to be felt, for in the act of pure observation self-awareness is suspended and, at least for an instant, subject coalesces with object and feels the pulse of its existence beating indistinguishably from its own" (1988, p.88). Viola frequently cites William Blake's "doors of perception" quote (1793; Viola, 1995, p. 60) which identifies infinity as an attribute of all things. When one sees eternity in an object one is seeing it either as an infinite duration or as an infinite continuum of instants. The 'infinite duration' recalls the spatio-analytical meditation method, described in the last chapter, which reveals the object to be infinitely sub-divisible; the 'infinite continuum of instants' recalls the dynamic-synthetical method which resolves the phenomenon as event into the sum of its external relations, including its relation to the external observer. The object can no longer be said to have any real presence of its own. It can be said to inhabit a *specious* present. The concept of a specious present was coined by E. R. Clay (1882):

this present to which the datum refers is really part of the past - a recent past - delusively given as a time that intervenes between the past and the future. Let it be named the specious present and let the past that is given by being past be known as the obvious past (London, 1988, p.79).

Thus we are the eternal late-comers to our own experience. This curiously anticipates Derrida's Deconstruction of Presence.

Viola next introduces subjects into the frame of *Hatsu Yume*, human figures who disconcertingly reduce what appeared as mountainous to surprisingly diminutive proportions (see Fig. 7). Infinity has, however, already been established as a property of the rock. Viola's intention, Kuspit concludes, is to imply that human presence is "an unnecessary intrusion on Reality, undermining its eternal verity" (ibid., p.74). The human sense apparatus affords a limited perspective, not a privileged access to Reality. Thus is reflected a very basic instance of postmodern 'perspectivism',

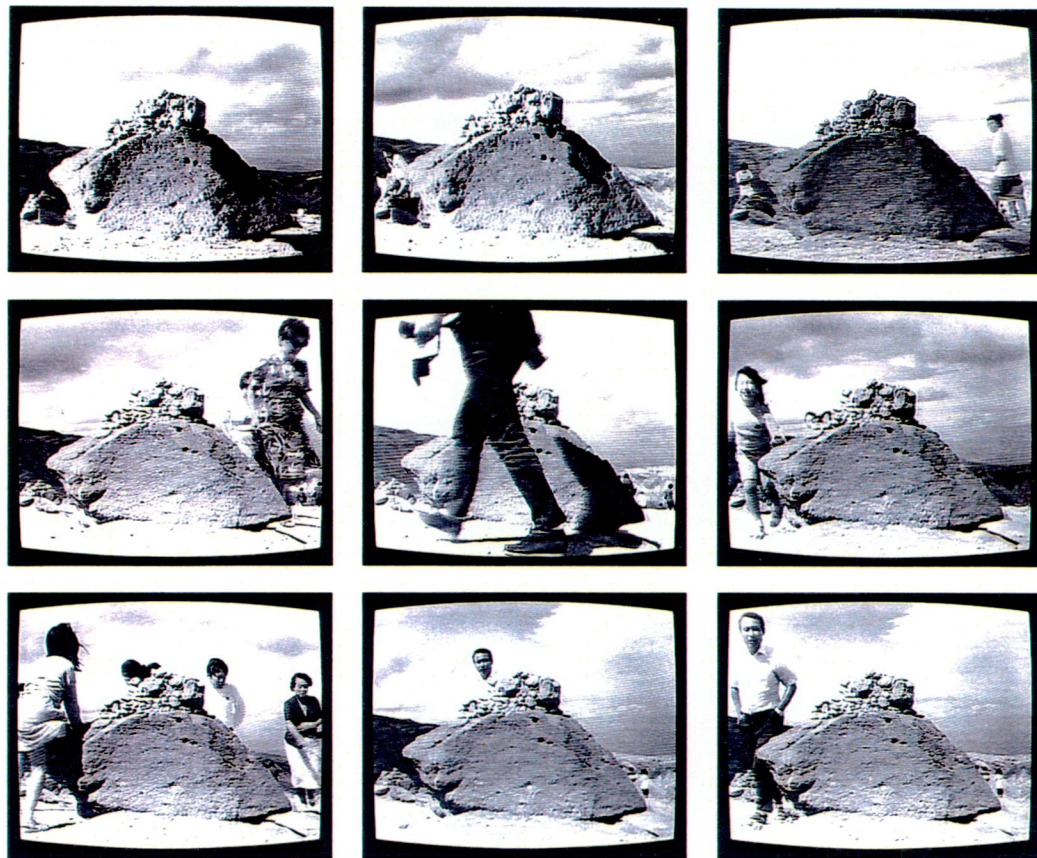


Fig. 7. *Hatsu Yume [First Dream]* (1981)

following on from the dispersal of the subject. Otto Neumaier describes how in later installations, *The Sleep of Reason* (1988), *The Stopping Mind* (1991), *Threshold* (1992), or *Tiny Deaths* (1993) there is always something going on outside the onlooker's field of vision (Puhlinger, 1994, p.74). In the more recent *Pneuma* (1994) which involves the projection, on all four walls of an enclosed space, of grainy black-and-white figures, shot in silhouette, the viewers' shadows are unavoidably involved in the image as in Plato's Cave Allegory. Thus images are presented *as images*, according to Kulananda's understanding of the role of visual art, to which reference was made in Chapter Three.

Viola has more to say of his aspirations in this direction. In the aforementioned interview with Raymond Bellour he discussed what he referred to as his video-disc project:

I think that in a funny way, this breaking away from the light basis of images will lead back to certain aspects of older traditions, to the way that images were created in the Middle Ages in

Europe and still are in the East. The image is not considered to be a frozen moment or an effect of light or anything like that. It's really conceived as existing within the spectator. The image is the projection of the viewer and the whole point is the interaction of the viewer and the image. The image itself has become more related to a diagram. A mandala, for example is really a diagrammatic or schematic representation of a larger system, not necessarily the depiction of an object as it appears to the eye... I see technology moving us towards building objects from the inside out, rather than from the outside in... the ability to manipulate line and colour electronically. This was the first stage - the first video images made without a camera. Soon images will be formed out of a system of logic, almost like a form of philosophy - a way of describing an object based on mathematical codes and principles, rather than freezing its light waves in time. This is the intrinsic reality of objects in traditional Asian art (*October*, 34, Autumn 1985, p.116).

(ii) Viola's *Via Negativa*: "I relate to the role of the mystic," Viola has said, "in the sense of following a *Via Negativa*" (*Art Forum*, Vol. 33, May 1995, p.88). One could say of Viola's work that it is less successful when its references, namely its 'mystical' or Buddhist references, become too explicit. This criticism could be applied, for instance, to his *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1982-1983). Two separate pieces in fact are included under the one title. The first, made in 1982 (see Fig. 8), is somewhat interactive, including a chair and headphones for the viewer, situated facing a monitor. On screen, Viola himself appears in close-up. Having deprived himself of sleep for a number of days, he is extremely tired and is trying to remain alert, looking directly at the camera. The viewer can hear vague murmurings through the headphones. Unprompted, a figure suddenly emerges from the darkness and strikes Viola across the head with a rolled-up magazine, the sound of the blow exaggeratedly reverberating in the earphones. The stream-of-consciousness internal monologue is rudely stopped only to begin again moments later, incurring another blow of the magazine, and so on. The second piece (1983; Fig. 9) is a videotape, recording Viola's attempts to stay awake in the same room over a period of three days.

Returning for a moment to the first *Reasons for Knocking* (1982), the piece is actually referring to the Zen Buddhist master's propensity, if he notices a student's concentration beginning to wane during a meditation exercise, to strike the student with his stick. It is through such shocks to the system, according to Zen, that the practitioner is delivered to satori, Enlightenment. Interesting though this is, Viola's video installation does little more than describe it and give rather an unsubtle description at that. Yet the orientation of the viewer opposite Viola suggests that he is trying to impart the essence of his experience to the viewer. With the second tape the audience is offered an interesting spectacle, that of a man struggling against fatigue and the effects of solitary confinement, but, in fact, whatever benefits or insights Viola

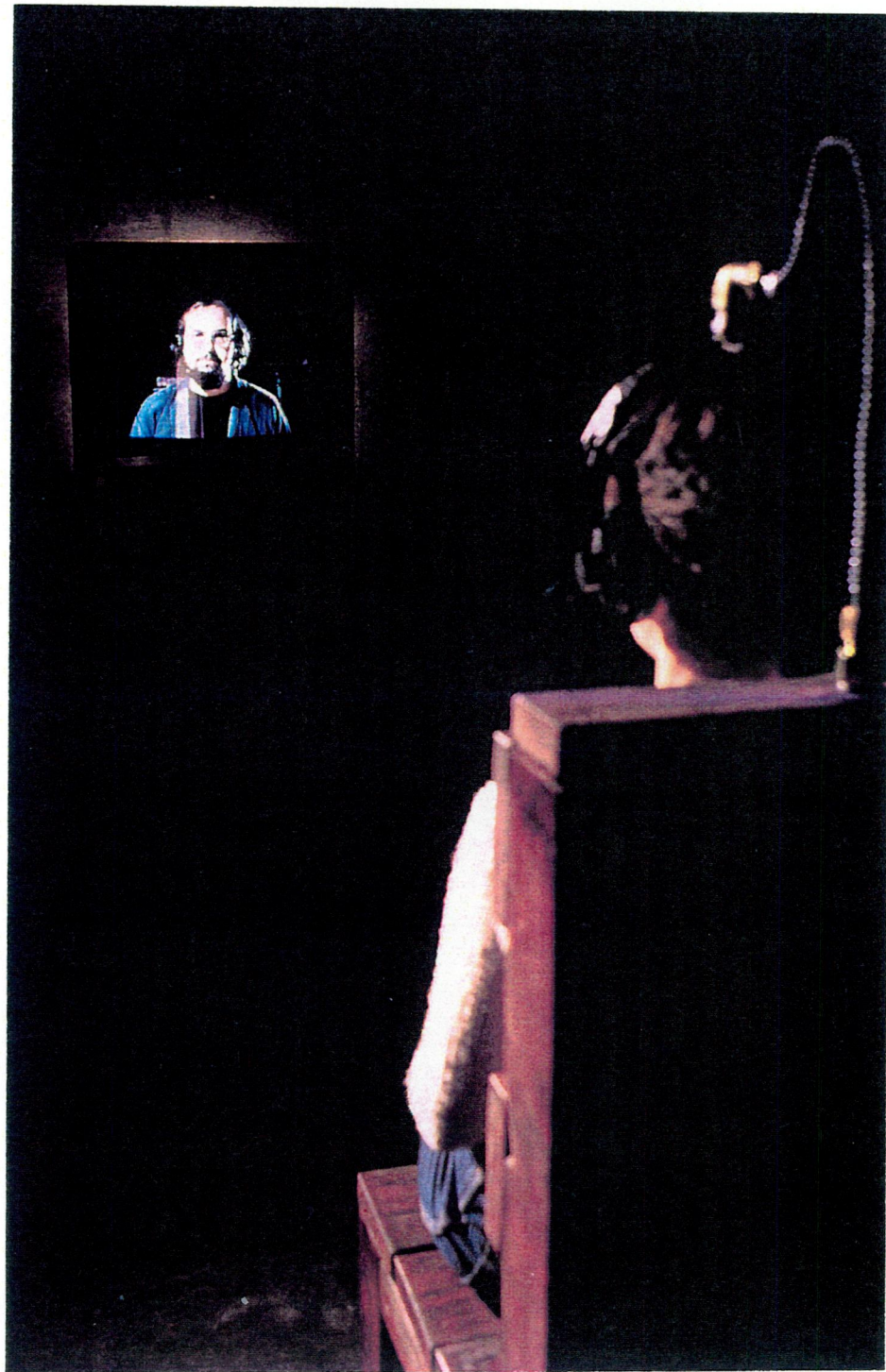


Fig. 8. *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1982)



Fig. 9. *Reasons for knocking at an Empty House* (1983)

derives from these exercises in asceticism are not really communicated to the audience. These kinds of experiences are not to be had vicariously. It might be suggested that it is only through the sublimation of the experience, through poetry/aesthetics that any intimation can be given of the nature of that experience.

Viola's resistance to aesthetics is unfortunate in this respect particularly because many of his works are, if inadvertently, beautiful. There is however another reason, and one that was hinted at earlier, why sublimation is called for. Viola's subject matter is grim. Most of us are intellectually aware of our own mortality and yet few of us can be said to be fully reconciled with the fact that we are going to die. Sangharakshita's commentary on the first Noble Truth is pertinent here: "Recognition of the first Noble Truth comes not as a pleasant intellectual diversion but as a terrible emotional shock... Only a shock of this kind is strong enough to galvanize the whole being into action" (1956, p.146).

Certainly Viola's recent video-projection piece *The Messenger* (1996) has taken him one step closer to the traumatic dimensions of the bodily existence. The image of a

man alternately rising to the surface and sinking back into the depths of what could be an unending expanse of water, makes for impressive, yet uncomfortable viewing. The experience of drowning is approximated further by a considerable slowing down of the footage, while the figure is immersed. When the figure emerges the sound of a thunderous release of breath and an intake of breath resound before 'the Messenger', once again, sinks beneath the surface. The breath is traditionally the most important support for Buddhist meditation, establishing a mind-body equilibrium and bridging psychic and emotional schisms. More than that, however, Viola's tapes recall certain objects of *vipasyana* meditation (that is, meditation aimed at the achievement of insight into reality rather than merely augmenting the state of consciousness/concentration), specifically the Analysis of the Four Elements (Viola: "We come from water and, in a way, we slide back into its undifferentiated mass at death"; *October*, no. 34, Autumn 1985, p. 97) and Reflection upon the Ten Stages of Decomposition of a Corpse (see Appendix 1.5) aimed at awareness of impermanence and the relinquishing of emotional attachment to the body. A certain grounding in ordinary meditation and a certain reserve of emotional positivity are required before any such *vipasyana* meditation techniques are undertaken. The story is told of how the Buddha himself recommended to a group of monks the second of these two specific meditation techniques mentioned, only to return to the same place months later to find that each and every monk had succumbed to depression and committed suicide. In this respect it is fortunate, as regards Viola's audience, that there are few people in the latter half of the twentieth century prepared to commit themselves so completely to an idea or an artwork. The story, indeed, illustrates the self-destruction identified by Donald Kuspit as the risk involved in the acquisition of knowledge of the foundations of sensory existence.

Conclusion

The Messenger was commissioned for, and first shown in Durham Cathedral in September 1996. The word 'angel' is derived from the Greek word for 'messenger'. Dick Hebdige uses the term *bricolage* to describe the phenomenon, particularly visible in the postmodern era of how individuals manipulate disparate cultural phenomena in order to explain their world to themselves in satisfactory ways (Jencks, 1992, p.116). Bill Viola's model is far more sophisticated than some kind of pastiche of eclectic source materials, yet his affiliations with Christianity sit somewhat uncomfortably with his deference to Buddhist sources, given the latter's insistence that



Fig. 3.2. *The Messenger* (1996)

a belief in a personal God is an impediment to spiritual progress. The personal beliefs of artists do not ordinarily constitute grounds for criticism, nor does this represent a grave inconsistency in Viola's work. It merits attention only because Viola identifies himself as operating within a branch of knowledge rather than aesthetics. Moreover it is conative/affective knowledge with which he is dealing, which, for Buddhism, is religious knowledge, aimed at producing the most fundamentally religious state of mind, egolessness. Even the most abstract intellectual error can, according to Buddhism, constitute a barrier to this achievement.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to demonstrate the parallels between Buddhism and postmodernism. The promlematizing of the subject/ego, the opacity of language, the destruction of all points of origin: to anyone familiar with the languages of these two discourses the parallels suggest themselves. The challenge was to treat their demonstration as more than just an academic exercise, grouping like with like. Before considering the wider implications of the identification of one with the other, the following is a brief account of the main parallels outlined between Buddhism and postmodernism:

(i) Conditionality, the language of Buddhism was identified with the Superstructuralist priority of structures over their constituent parts. This priority manifested, variously as culture over nature, society over man, *langue* over *parole*.

(ii) The denial of origin in both can be traced back to the first parallel. Conditioned Co-production avoids reference to an originary cause from which all causes and effects derive. According to Buddhism, *anamattagga*, 'incalculable is the beginning' (Sangharakshita, 1957, p.57). Superstructuralism's adoption of a starting point outside of experience constituted a denial of origin (*logos*) in God, man, or semiology.

(iii) The opacity of language is established by both, and yet language occupies an important place in Buddhism and postmodernism. The Nagarjuna/Derrida discussion extended into a consideration of the parallels between superstructuralist Objective Idealism and the Buddhist doctrine of *cittamatra*, that 'nothing exists save thought'.

(iv) The problematizing of the subject/ego is, perhaps, their most compelling point of contact. Lacan's *dividua* represent the congeries of evanescent materials which, for Buddhism make up the subject, the object of their project of negation which is in itself a negation, a 'suppression of reality'. Postmodernity disperses the subject. Buddhism actively produces the *akincana*, 'man-of-nought' (Sangharakshita, 1956, p.197).

At every level postmodern philosophy and Buddhist philosophy seem to interpenetrate. However, the practical implications of this thesis point to where they

differ. Buddhism is essentially a religion and it is as a religion that Buddhism has most to offer in the postmodern, (post)Christian context. The poststructuralist prediction of the end of philosophy will not be enacted, as long as practice remains divorced from experience. As the poststructuralist, Julia Kristeva has pointed out, "Desire and the desire to know are not strangers to each other" (Jencks, 1992, p.203). Buddhism aims at extinguishing philosophical views (*drsti*) at their desiderative source.

Postmodern art: *Ex Oriente Lux*

Almost a century and a half ago, Arthur Schopenhauer, influenced more deeply than any other Western thinker by the spirit of Indian philosophy, predicted a renaissance brought about by the discovery, in the nineteenth century, of the treasures of Oriental literature. Its glory would eclipse the achievement of the first Renaissance, which the rediscovery of the classics of Greece and Rome had prompted in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In the introduction was mentioned the fact that Buddhism entered Western cultural life with Schopenhauer and nineteenth century Romanticism, although only now is it being revealed in its full breadth to a western audience. If culture can be understood in its original sense of an improvement or skill brought about by practice, the Dharma can certainly be said to be exerting an influence on Western, postmodern cultural life. Its appearance in the work of one of the most celebrated contemporary artists, Bill Viola, as examined in this thesis, represents perhaps the first tentative attempts to integrate its language into postmodern art practice. Of course, explicitly Buddhist art is often primarily religious and only secondarily aesthetic. Viola's rejection of an aesthetic code for his own work becomes problematic in pieces like *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1982-1983), where, this thesis has suggested, a certain 'sublimation' of the experience referred to in the work would have been more appropriate. Viola seems to consider aesthetics incompatible with his function in a branch of knowledge, which is what he considers art to be. Ideally, art and philosophy, art and religion should fulfill the same function, namely the communication of values, the communication of affective knowledge, in other words. For Jim Collins, postmodernism does not mean the neglect of aesthetic judgements but their redefinition and relocation "at the junctures between opposing discourses, where critical, ethical and ideological decisions are made" (Jencks, 1992, p. 114).

APPENDICES

Appendix 1.1:

Dhammadinna, a Buddhist nun and original Sangha member gives the following account of conditioned co-production in terms of a number of *nidanas* (links):

(i) The first trend, *visabhaga-patibhagas* goes as follows: conditioned by 1. spiritual ignorance (*avidya*) arise. 2. karma formations (*samskara*); these may be considered the past life *nidanas* and lead successively to: 3. consciousness (*vijnana*), 4. name and form (*nama-rupa*), 5. the six sense field (consciousness is included as one of the six senses; *sadayatana*), 6. contact (*sparsa*), 7. feeling (*vedana*), 8. thirst (*trsna*), 9. grasping (*upadana*) and 10. becoming (*bhava*); these are the present life *nidanas* and lead to 11. birth (*jati*) and 12. death and decay (*jara-marana*) the 'next life' *nidanas*.

(ii) The second trend, *sadisa patibhaga* takes up where the first leaves off, nominating the thirteenth *nidana* suffering (*dukkha*) as a result of death and decay. This leads to: 14. faith (*sraddha*), 15. delight (*pramodya*), 16. joy (*priti*), 17. serenity (*prasrabdhi*), 18. bliss (*sukha*), 19. concentration (*samadhi*), 20. knowledge of things as they really are (*yathabhutu - jnanadarsana*), 21. disgust (*nirvid, nirveda*), 22. dispassion (*viraga*), 23. liberation (*vimukti*) and 24. knowledge of the destruction of the intoxicants (*asravaksaya-jnana*), the achievement of Nirvana in other words.

The Buddha endorsed Dhammadinna's account saying that he had nothing further to add to it.

Appendix 1.2:

The Noble Eightfold Way of Hinayana Buddhism is as follows:

- (i) right view (Skt. *samyag-drsti*; Pali *samma-ditthi*)
- (ii) right aspiration or resolve (Skt. *samyag-samikalpa*; Pali *samma-sankappa*)
- (iii) right speech (Skt. *samyag-vaca*; Pali *samma-kammaita*)
- (iv) right action (Skt. *samyak-karmanta*; Pali *samma-kammanta*)
- (v) right means of livelihood (Skt. *samyak-ajiva*; Pali *samma-ajiva*)
- (vi) right exertion or effort (Skt. *samyag-vyayama*; Pali *samma-vayama*)
- (vii) right mindfulness (Skt. *samyak-smrti*; Pali *samma-samadhi*)

Appendix 1.3:

The Mahayana prefers to speak in terms of the Six or Ten Perfections (*paramitas*). The six perfections are:

- (i) the Perfection of Giving (Skt. *dana-paramita*)
- (ii) the Perfection of Morality (*sila-paramita*)
- (iii) the Perfection of Patience (*ksanti-paramita*)
- (iv) the Perfection of Vigour (*virya-paramita*)
- (v) the Perfection of Meditation (*dyana-paramita*)
- (vi) the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajna-paramita*)

The more exacting Ten Perfections include the following four additional *paramitas*:

- (vii) the Perfection of Skilful Means (*upaya-kausalya paramita*)
- (viii) the [Bodhisattva] Vow (*pranidana*; this consists of ten items/observances; for further reading see Sangharakshita's *A Survey of Buddhism*, p. 459).
- (ix) the Perfection of Strength or Power (*bala-paramita*) this *paramita* too can be enumerated as ten powers or five. The five powers are the dynamic aspects of the Five Spiritual Faculties : Faith (*sraddha*), Vigour (*virya*), Mindfulness (*smrti*), Concentration (*samadhi*), and Wisdom (*prajna*). The ten are simply a more involved breakdown of the five strengths/powers.

The recurrence of these groups of ten can be explained by the fact that much of the literature in the Mahayana canon was produced at the time when the decimal system first emerged.

- (x) the Perfection of knowledge (*jnana - paramita*)

Appendix 1.4:

Ten items of good character (*dasa-sila*; **not** commandments) may be referred to by Buddhists as a guide to Morality (*sila*), the first of the three trainings. The *dasa-sila* are as follows:

- (i) abstinence from taking life
- (ii) from taking what is not given
- (iii) from misconduct (or any kind of indulgence) in sexual desires.
- (iv) from telling lies
- (v) from harsh speech
- (vi) from slander
- (vii) from frivolous and senseless talk
- (viii) from covetousness
- (ix) from malevolence
- (x) from wrong and false views.

The *panca-sila* or five items, which are the minimum required of a practicing Buddhist, involve the first four of the *dasa-sila* and a fifth:

- (v) abstinence from any state of indolence arising from the use of intoxicants.

Appendix 1.5:

The forty *kammatthanas*, supports for meditation, are comprised of the following:

- (i) The Ten Devices (*kasina*): elements earth, water, fire, and air; the colours blue, yellow, red, and white; space and consciousness.
- (ii) The Ten Impurities (*asubha*): according to Buddhaghosa, the ten disgusting aspects of bodily existence; also described as the Ten Stages of Decomposition of a Corpse.
- (iii) The Ten Recollections (*anussati*): The Buddha, the Dharma, the Order, Morality, liberality, the gods, death, the body, respiration, and the peace of Nirvana.
- (iv) The Four Sublime Abodes (*brahma-vihara*): Love (*metta*, as opposed to *pema*, affection), Compassion (*karuna*), Sympathetic Joy (*mudita*), and Equanimity (*upekkha*) towards all beings. These correspond to four stages of superconsciousness.
- (v) The Four Formless Spheres (*arupayatana*): four additional stages of superconsciousness.
- (vi) The Perception of the Loathsomeness of Food (*ahare patikkula-sanna*)
- (vii) Analysis of the Four Elements (*catudhatuvavatthana*): mental separation, with regard to the body of the parts pertaining respectively to the four great elements, earth, water, fire and air.

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