THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

NC 0015597 7

Thesis NO 541
M005574INC

PAINTING PICTURES

An examination of the relationship between the canvas and the screen

A Thesis submitted to:

The Faculty of History of Art and Design
& Complementary Studies

and

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART
PAINTING DEPARTMENT

by

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April 1988

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INTRODUCTION

Initially I had intended to research the use of painting as a cinematic visual style, or rather how the semiotics of the canvas have been raided as an inevitable source for the more recent motion visuals of the screen. Further reading however, while confirming this to some degree, also revealed a hesitation by filmakers to either admit to, or give credit for, such a 'raiding' process. What has emerged more clearly is that through the recent success of several relatively young American painters whose work clearly illustrates that this 'raiding' process, does in fact work both ways. A cursary glance at the popular media also indicates that these media not only look upon their own histories but also each others as relevant source material. Popular music and fashion have always had a fertile relationship in the last thirty years, and more recently the music industry has begun 'sampling' cinematic history by lifting dialogue direct from the filmed soundtrack and mixing it with rhythms from its own history ('House' and 'Hip-Hop'). Fashion too, has had a similar relationship with film where, and especially with the advent of the rock video, it can step onto the largest of possible catwalks. Literature has been a prominant source for filmed narratives throughout the century and recently has turned about face with books reading like filmed narratives, from the books as inevitable source for television mini-series (almost written for that purpose, i.e. Jackie Collins work, to the more psychologically based 'cinematic' contemporary work of Gordon Lish, Peru and Dear Mr. Capote - the latter owing an obvious debt to its own literary history.

Even comic books, another cinematic source, have lately exhibited borrowings from cinematic and literary forms, most notably Alan Moore's Watchmen and Halo Jones, and David McKean's Violent Cases.

This work then will be an examination of the relationship between the canvas and the screen and how they can and do refer to each other. I will not even begin to try to include an entire history of this relationship, but will instead make specific (contemporary where possible) references to specific artists throughout, and speak of them in terms of the issues being raised. The main thrust of the discussion will be based on both form and content, in isolation and in conjunction with these various artists. Consequently it will be broken down into three main chapters broadly examining narrative work in both mediums, primarily because this is the role most widely expected of film and one which modernist painting has largely ignored. The recent success of Eric Fischl and Robert Birmelin has sought to redress this balance by embracing, as shall be illustrated, the narrative codes practiced for nearly a century of celluloid history.

Chapter One will deal mainly with the technical side of the crossover, discussing both the obvious links between the mediums - framing and composition - and the less obvious but potential crossover areas of spectator viewpoint, out of frame action and audience implication. Chapter Two opens with a broad definition for narrative work and what follows is a concise history of narrative painting and how film has come to be the dominant narrative mode.

Chapter three then deals with cinema's mythic capabilities and how in recent years filmakers have tried to redress the earlier myths conveyed in its own brief history. And this is where Eric Fischl comes in, for it is his work which covers much the same demythologising process.

To conclude there will be a questioning of this process and reaffirmation of the necessity of the cross-fertilizing process. And finally to quote Bernardo Bertolucci:

> ".. 1900, like all my films, makes use of all the materials not only of the cinema but of literature, painting and music as well, of everything thats come before. Basically, cinema is really a kind of resevoir of the collective memory of this century."[1]

For this is the main point for discussion that painting, like film, should become that 'kind of resevoir', not merely of its own history as has been practiced of late, i.e. Neo Expressionism, Neo Geometric abstraction and the Italians 'looting' of the Renaissance/ classical archives, for this results in hybrids and inbred mutations, but instead a resevoir of contempory (or otherwise) popular media, embracing their signs and symbols, not as Kitsch Tokenism, but as a valuable extension to its own language and histories.

Footnotes:

1. Bernardo Bertolucci Art, Politics, Cinema - The Cineaste Interviews p.144

CHAPTER ONE

Re: Framing, Frame, composition and the 'Mise en Cadre'

"Horizontal lines suggest repose, peace, serenity... vertical lines denote strength, authority, dignity... diagonal lines crossing the frame evoke action, movement, the power to overcome obstacles. This is why in the cinema many battle scenes or violent encounters are set on sloping ground as ascending or descending compositions, with cannons or swords at 45 degree angles... Curved compositions that move circularly commute feelings of exhaltation, euphoria and joy. This principle is noticeable in most of the ride equipment in Fun Fairs. And it is no coincidence that so many folk dances are done in circles." [1]

Stephen Heath in his book Questions of Cinema informs us it is no accident that the term 'frame' emerged from painting to describe the material unit of the film: "Etymologically speaking the word frame means 'to advance', 'to further', 'to gain ground'". It thus becomes obvious that such a term is applicable now, and solely so, to the cinema. but more than being the singular unit, the term is also used to describe, "..the image in its setting.. as well as to provide an expression for the passage of the Film in the projector relative to the aperture, 'in frame', and for the camera viewpoint, 'framing' and 'reframing'"[2]. Moreover

there has arisen the aesthetic value of the staging of a frame, more commonly referred to as the 'Mise en Scene' as borrowed from from the theatre , or the 'Mise en Cadre' to which Heath refers in ralation to the cinema. Both the above refer to the placing of objects and figures in relation to each other and their given framework and in so doing refer specifically to the aesthetic rules of the placement of elements within a canvas.

The quote which opens this chapter comes from Nestor Almendros, a director of photography of some standing whose works include, La Collectioneuse, Kramer Vs. Kramer and Sophies Choice. The pointers he refers to in the above are, "a few simple classic principles", of composition which he freely admits come by way of similar aesthetic guidelines found in representational painting. Likewise with Stephen Heath whose terms are equally applicable, and have been, to painting. Though the specifics of 'Mise en Cadre' in cinema may seem 'loftier' that the 'composition' in painting, they are in fact two words for more or less the same thing. Although many directors are extremely conscious of the workings of the 'Mise en Cadre' (Luchino Viscontis', Death in Venice (1971) and Alain Resnais' Last Year in Marienbad (1962) almost too conscious in fact, seldom do they actually seek to emulate or indeed recreate the works of other artists in other fields. Woody Allen in his film Interiors (1978) does just this, claiming to have based a lot of the 'set pieces' on the etchings of Edvard Munch. 'Midsummer Nights Sex Comedy (1982), is not only a reworking of Ingmar Bergman's Smiles of a Summer Night

(1955), it is also a homage to the impressionists, or more particularly Claude Monet. Indeed the long shots in the film tend to evoke the figurative work of Edward Manet 'romping' through the landscape of a turn of the century Monet.[3] Nicholas Roeg's Bad Timing (1978) could be seen as a cinematic exploration of the psycho-sexual nuances prevelant in the paintings and drawings of Egon Schiele. The paintings themselves make an appearance early on in the narrative and what follows in the 'live action' increasingly comes to echo their content and compositional form. As mentioned in the introduction this 'raiding' or cross-referencing to other mediums works both ways.

> "Look at the facile convention that equates the frames of a shot and of a canvas.."[4]

The point that is missed here is not that the single frame (the movie still) is unequivical to the canvas, but that the canvas must ideally contain a lot more if painting is to compete as a narrative form. The film 'still' however well crafted or conscious it is of its own artistic merits with regard to the mise en cadre, must always be a fragment of a larger piece. It exists only as a 'frozen' moment, a carefully constructed episode in isolation of all other moments, just as a character in a play or novel must not be bound by the beginning of the first chapter/act and the end of the final one, it must exist beyond its boundaries. It does not have a greater 'physical' manifestation of itself outside the imagination of the viewer. The canvas must provoke this larger entity in the minds of its audience. It is perhaps clearer to suggest that ideally a painting

should, within its given limitations, become a whole series of 'frames', an entire 'reel', if not a whole film and more. The 'one frame' upon a canvas must create from within its confines a world beyond those same boundaries.

Two contemporary American painters work in just such a way. Robert Birmelin and Eric Fischl use narrative content which is executed with perhaps more debt to film and television than to their own history in painting. Their contribution to narrative painting will be examined further in Chapter Two; here, the ways these narratives are conveyed will be examined.

Birmelin's work more closely resembles that of the camera than Fischl's. His methods of framing, aggresive cropping, the use of multiple vanishing points, the illusionary fracturing of the picture plane are all the workings of a mind that has witnessed the increasing media barrage of the last thirty years and it indicates that a new kind of representational imagery is necessary. John Yau in an article for Artforum describes Birmelins work thus:

> "Birmelin has deliberately and vigorously switched the picture-as-window idea with rather disturbing anti-picturesque results. Instead of being presented with the detached, privileged, or ironic views that are so familiar in the 20th Century realism, the viewer is involved, even implicated as a possible victim collaborator, or witness... One is reminded of the constantly roving eye that has to take everything into account, and the never-ending

adjustments of instinct, pace, and direction, needed to thread one's way through a crowd."[5]

What Yau fails to point out is that this most closely echoes the moving of a camera lens. The works are cropped, severely at that. Figures leaving the frame hold almost, if not more attention than those more centred. The viewer is invited out of the 'frame' by these figures, expanding what is presented to one, into ones imagination. What goes on beyond these boundaries so aggressively set? But more important is Yau's first point about the viewer being almost implicated in the action/non-action of the scene. In cinema, if a camera moves forward and 'enters' a scene, it gives the impression of bringing the audience into the action, the very heart of the narrative intruding or at least partaking intimately in that narrative. And this is exactly how Birmelin implicates. The use of a 'confrontational' close-up which almost literally breaks the picture plane brings the viewer in behind it, where, with a conscious manipulation of the rules of composition, Birmelin 'bounces' one back and forth from extreme foreground through varying middleground to various vanishing pionts (Fig.1). This is the type of effect which Lumiere's early filmed crowd scenes may have had on an audience as yet cinematically uneducated.[6]

Fischl on the other hand owes more to the Hitchcockian school of dramatic implication. Unlike Birmelin's almost strictly urban scenes, Fischl's sources are in suburbia. Manicured lawns, swimming pools, bar-b-ques and beach-side vacations are just some of the sets Fischl constructs for

Fig. 1

Robert Birmelin, *On the Street—An Event with Two Cops* (diptych), 1981–2, acrylic on canvas, each 22 × 48"

his characters to play out their parts. These sets and characters are themselves constructs of the advertisers vision of suburban America. Television having made fodder of cinematic genres, rapidly became the ideal billboard for 'lifestyle' advertising. What Fischl does with this mythic representation will be dealt with in the third chapter. Again as with Birmelin, the viewer is an integral part of that aforementioned set, but with Fischl that role is complicit. Here the view through the lens so to speak, is voyeuristic in nature. Sleepwalker (1979), as John Yau points out, is a good example for discussion (Fig.2). A pubescent boy stands at night in a plastic wading pool bathed in a "Yellow acidly light" and masturbates. What makes it so cinematic is the detail in both form and content.[7] There is the boy, he is thin, naked and standing in that pool at the top of which are two empty patio chairs, the lawn, that yellowish light, all so clearly indicative of a particular social setting. And the viewer is above, slightly behind and to the left, looking down as if (as Yau suggests), "... watching him from a back-bedroom window," the implication being that one has chanced to glimpse at something which one wasn't meant to, and that is pure Hitchcock.[8]

Fischl's strength is in the implied mythological symbolism which he himself is in the process of creating. By placing equal importance on apparently blandly cohesive or seemingly disparate elements within his frameworks he is in fact consciously interpreting the nature of the film camera. Paul Schrader as director on An American Gigilo

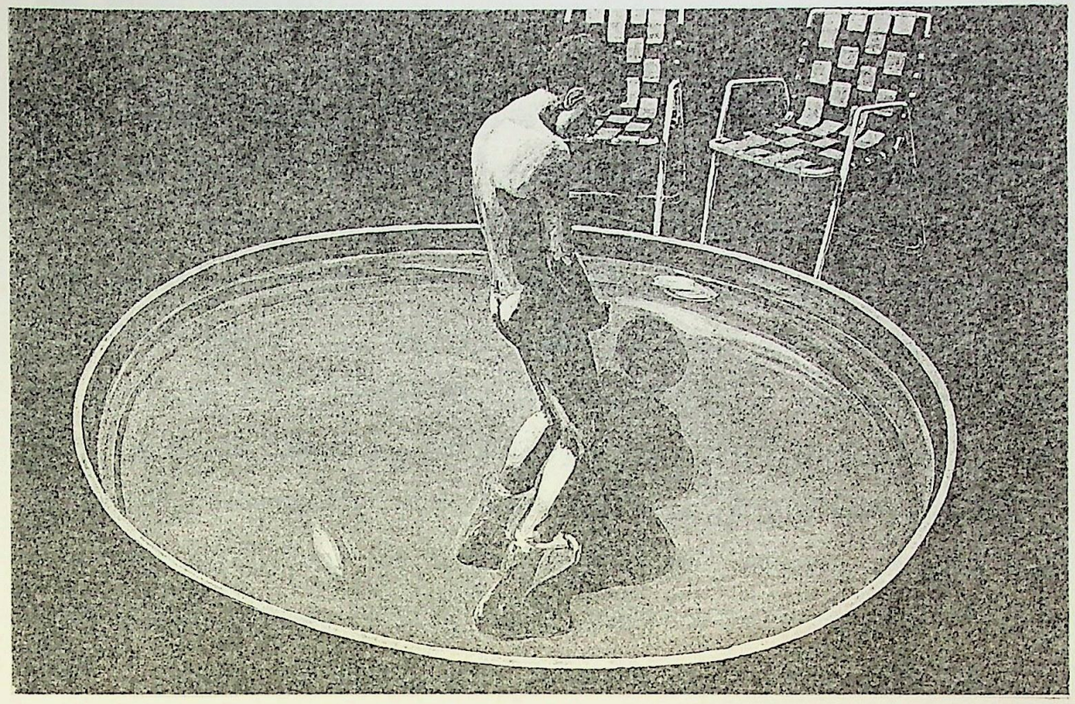


FIG. 2 *Sleepwalker*
1979
183 x 274
The Downe Collection
New York, New York, U.S.A.

(1980) explores the same sets and characters and contributes in no small way to the same re-examination of the darker side of the American psyche, (to be discussed in the third chapter).

What sets Fischl and Birmelin apart from other twentieth century representational painters? Yau prefers to explain this in terms of psychology: "They are acutely focused on the tyranny of what is acceptable, as it is revealed by our gestures modes of social interaction, and the various images of self we present to the world". Though this may be true, a useful definition by John Berger on the difference between Naturalism and Realism perhaps clarifies the aforementioned artists position, bearing in mind the fact that Berger makes this definition in relation to Soviet Socialist Realism. Naturalism, Berger suggests, is on the whole, unselective, or rather it is only selective, "... in order to present with maximum credibility the immediate scene", with no basis for selection outside the present. Realsim on the other hand is selective and, "...strives towards the typical, yet what is typical of a situation is only revealed by its development in relation to other situations. Thus realism selects in order to construct a totality." To clarify, "..it is a distinction between two attitudes towards experience, formed in the main by the artists' imaginative and intellectual grasp of what is happening / changing in his world. A distinction between a submissive worship of events just because they occur (naturalism) and the confident inclusion of them within a personally constructed but objectively truthful world view."[9]

If one broadly transferred such a definition to 'realist' paintings in western culture of the last thirty years, one would have to substitute 'synthetic' realsim for naturalism in the above. Chuck Close's obsessive portraits where the technique is the essential content of his work could be described as synthetic realism and hence fit in with the definition for naturalsim. Though the definition for realism is idyllic to say the least, it does in part refer to both Birmelin and Fischl in that they do select in order to construct, and perhaps more importantly for this thesis, they select from other mediums / experiences to inform their own.

Walter Benjamin in his essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'[10] offers a direct comparison between the fields of filmaking and Painting. This comparison, as shall be illustrated, results in placing filmaking in a more favourable position. The comparison offered is that of the painter and the cameraman. This in itself brings in an altogether different question, that of the auteurship of the motion picture. At its most community based, it is a largely collaborate piece, but ultimately the final concept falls on the heads of the producers / directors. Nestor Almendros however gives a convincing argument for the 'look' of a film being credited to the director of photography.[11] Either way, one imagines that Benjamin is referring to the individual who decides on what is to be filmed and how this is to be

done rather than the physical operator of the camera. Benjamin then takes recourse to an analogy between surgeon and faith healer who, in his mind, are 'polar opposites'.

In comparing these two, Benjamin is in fact comparing the physical nature of their work and not the results obtained. The Faith healter, while acting on a patient, retains a natural distance only coming into surface contact by the laying on of hands, whereas the surgeon by the intimate nature of his work must in fact do the opposite. His work brings him right into the patient, penetrating to the very cause of the ailment, there can be no distancing of the physical self. Benjamin then brings this to bear on the difference between painter and cameraman:

> "The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web... Thus for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more signifcant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thorough going permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all (such) equipment."

By this Benjamin means that film offers us a reality extremely close to our own but displays little of the means by which that end was reached, through 'close-ups', the focussing on hidden details of familiar objects, slow motion, ever diversifying camera angles and movements and various other innovations of the cinematograpers craft.

Film (and perhaps of more sociological importance in the latter half of this century, television) has brought a new optical language to a larger audience than previously could have been imagined. The camera brings to the human eye what it can never hope to realize unaided, the implication being that painting cannot hope to compete, if indeed it should even try, on that level, Benjamin puts it thus:

> "Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than, opens to the naked eye - if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man".

However, against Benjamin's argument it could be said, and taking into account that his essay dates from 1935, the notion that film offers one a reality without the evident means as to how it was obtained is a gross generalisation. At least ten years prior to this essay the arts of cinematography and editing had reached heights sufficient to produce Sergei Tisenstein's Battleship Potemkin (1925), a film whose success was based at least partly, if not in total on the blatantly obtrusive camerawork. No audience could have considered it anything but a film. True, they may have believed that the events were real enough but they left a cinema at its end, not a battleground. What must be brought into question, is not the means by which a faith healer or surgeon, painter or cameraman achieves their results, but the actual result. Added to this, a half century later, audiences have hugely increased their visual languages, courtesy of cinema, television and the printered

media. In that audience are the like of Fischl and Birmeln, Warhol and Lichenstein, Hopper and Wyeth. admittedly not all are narrative painters (Likewise, filmakers are not all story tellers), but the main body of their work is representational, artists whose work pertains to reality, a reality as valid perhaps as any filmakers. The crossovers already cited from one medium to another and back make the visual language of Fischl and Birmelin as significant a representation of reality as that of Woody Allen, Nicholas Roeg, Alfred Hitchcock or David Lynch (whose contribution will be mentioned later).

Finally, and referring back to Stephen Heath (who also quotes Benjamin from the same essay), he notes that film is generally limited to a standard three to four ratio horizontal rectangle and that it, "... destroys the ordinary laws of pictorial composition because of its moving human figures which capture attention above all else". He then quotes Benjamin on the subject of the incompatibility between film and painting from the position of the spectator:

> "The painting invites the spectator to contemplation, before it the spectator can abandon himself to his association. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene that it is already changed. It cannot be arrested... The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant sudden change."

Again with hindesight, the notion that a cinema audience cannot assimilate that which they can associate with can be dismissed. Even in the first half of this century the cult of the movie existed. Benjamin seems to dismiss the possibility of more than a single viewing. Repeated viewings allow the audience to savour the subtleties of a good director. Latter day directors such as Francis Coppola (Godfather I + II) and Martin Scorcose (Taxi Driver) constantly refer to the viewers associations. Indeed more recently Brian de Palma's Untouchables and David Lynch's Blue Velvet relied almost exclusively on the spectators ability to make the necessary association with cinemas own history, and one's own conception of that history.

Heath points out that what needs to be stressed is the: "Insistance of the frame which stays in view throughout the comparison, in place the constant screen." This is to say that, however much the film changes from frame to frame, scene to scene, there is the 'constant screen' containing them. This 'constant screen' however does not act like the frame of a picture, rather it acts like a mask which allows us to see only part of the event, not unlike the proscenium arch in theatre. Heath here quotes Bazin: "When a person leaves the field of the camera, we recognise that he or she is out of the field of vision, though continuing to exist identically as another part of the scene which is hidden from us." This then leads one to the fact that these moving figures are constantly steppping 'into' and 'out of'

the frame, a luxury apparently lacking on the canvas. However, one is agian reminded of Birmelin's 'cropped' figures, walking out or into the frame of his canvas. Here perhaps a quote from Gerald Mast, on the 'off-frame' device in cinema may be applied. "The off-frame device never really surpresses information. It deliberately urges the viewer to savour the difference between what he knows and what he has seen."[12] Birmelin's work (and Fischl's) provokes this response. The viewer is forced to make suppositions using the evidence presented and excluded to build up a sense of 'before' and 'after' to fill in the gaps as to why a particualr situation has come about. Film makes obvious and glaring ommissions based on the same principle, that the audience can fill in those details, make certain assumptions and thus begin to build a narrative.

Footnotes

1. Nestor Almendros, "Some thought on my Profession", Film Theory and Criticism, p.611
2. Stephen Heath, Questions of cinema, pp.10-13
3. Robert Benayoun, Woody Allen/Beyond Words.
4. Andrey Tarkovsky, Sculpture in Time, p.70
5. John Yau, "The Paintings of Robert Birmelin, Eric Fischl, Ed Pasche (How we live)" Artforum, April 1983, p.62
6. G. Mast, "Kracauer's two tendencies and the early history of filmed narrative", The Language of Images, p.129 and also par.1 "of course, careful

study of the lumiere films reveals their conscious awareness of painting - both of Renaissance perspective and of the contemporary impressionists concern with the play of light itself.."

7. James Monaco in American Film Now refers to the mythic qualities of Coppola's cinema by his (Coppola's) "..profound-even reverent - reconstruction of a common past... He recreates times and places that many of us half remember. In the process he helps us to integrate the experience of our own pasts" p.345 This in turn can be transferred to Fischl's similar reconstructions.

8. See Alfred Hitchcocks, Rear Window, (1954)

9. John Berger, art and Revolution

10. Walter Benjamin "The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Film Theory & criticism, pp.675-694.

11. Nestor Almedros, "Some Thoughts on my Profession", Film Theory and Criticism pp.615-617

12. Gerald Mast, ibid, p.136 (footnote).

CHAPTER TWO

Re: Narratives - a history of narrative painting, film as the dominant narrative mode, painting 'borrows back' from the cinema.

"All narratives no matter in what medium are essentially suppositional, they function by invoking the subjunctive mood of the viewer's or readers imagination. The basic tactic of all narratives is to ask implicit questions that can be answered only by imaginative means. Once the viewer or reader goes along with a set of (usually stated) questions that can be dealt with only hypothetically - through the imagination - his attention will be engaged in a world of implied suppositions. The initial act in any narrative is to invite the viewer/reader to ask silently, what if..? Everything that follows this functions as either an assumption or a supposition following from the assumption. All art that works does so because it gets its audience to ask questions, and thereby to become involved. But the narrative arts work by putting their questions in a form that has no'correct' answers except in the imagination, their initial questions are not questions at all, but rather ploys to engage the viewers/readers mind."[7]

Narrative is an implicit part of film about which and of which all other threads hang. Heath informs us that it

must be presnet "... to lay out the images, to support the frame against its excess, to suggest laws to hold the movement, to ensure continuity, to be, 'cinematic form'" He goes on to quote J.H. Lawson's, Film: The Creative Process (1964): "The total rejection of a story, and the accompanying denial of syntax or arrangement, can only lead to the breakdown of cinematic form." The notion that film is an inherently narrative medium is a notion as old as the medium itself. Semiologists (Christian Hetz and Umberto Eco), Film critics and historians (Siegfried Kracauer, Erwin Panofsky, Gerald Mast) tend to discuss film in just such a light. [2] This is perhaps explained more clearly by Gerald Mast who considers that Film is synomynous with story telling and that this was;

> ".. the predictable outgrowth of a century (the nineteenth) that had converted the population of both America and Europe to enjoying fictionalised narratives and to taking them seriously. Further every single audience entertainment that could be considered a genuine predecessor of the motion picture - the magic lantern shows, the phantasmagoria, the panorama, the diorama, the tableau vivant, and the lantern slide photography - had all organised their light shows and visual imagery according to fictional narrative patterns."[3]

Once one accepts such a premise one must consider the practical problems for the earliest filmmakers as being the construction of a formative sequence of events within an

apparently real-looking visual context. To clarify, and again, to quote Mast: "The initial problems that films encountered ... included precisely those questions of denotiative sequentiality that Metz raised upon which narrative coherence (in any medium) depends: before and after, near and far, at the same time as, as a result of, five years later, meanwhile in another place, and so on."[4]

Referring to the previous chapter, one notes that, narrative is also an important aspect of the framing in film, in that it would dictate how best to frame itself with the kind of economy one expects of cinematic language the viewer does not need all the details, the multiple complexities of a script, handed to him on a plate as it were. No, the film audience has reached a level of cinematic education which allows it to make its own assumptions given only parts of the narrative. So, how then, does one know how to read a film?

A basic visual example is the way film treats one to a flashback within a narrative situation. The simple 'blurring out' of an image, the voice over (the 'titles or captions, which covered for the dialogue, were used in silent film), the zoom-in on an object in one time and the zoom-out into another, are all ways the audience have learned to know that they are being transported elsewhere on the narrative time scale. The split screen is a common device to display concurrent happenings in the narrative as is the constant shift from one scene to another and back

again. These methods can not only display the notion of, 'at the same time as', but also, by previous inferences and/or obviously different locales, they can mean, 'meanwhile in another place', possibly continents apart. As mentioned before, the cameras forward movement can bring the spectator into the heart of the situation, perhaps heightening it. The increasing rapid change of camera viewpoint is used almost exclusively to heighten a dramatic situation perhaps best illustrated in the 'shower scene' from Hitchcocks Psycho (1960), though Sergei Eisenstein, in the aforementioned Battleship Potemkin, is largely recognised as the grandfather of this editing technique. The introduction of sound, it must also be stated, played a large part in the coming of age of narrative cinema, though it must also be stressed that film is now both visual and aural and that good cinema is cinema which makes of these elements a cohesive whole. If the silent screen gave us film without sound and radio gives us sound without visuals it becomes obvious that both are limited as narrative forms and that film should make the best use of both elements.[5]

Semiologists, Christian Metz and Umberto Eco, dig somewhat deeper into cinematic language in order to codify the above 'signs'. Metz writes of the early pioneers (from Melies to Griffith) that they were: "Men of denotion rather than of connotation, they wanted, above all to tell a story, they were not content unless they could subject the continuous, analogical material of photoghraphic duplication to the articulations - however rudimentary - or a narrative discourse."[6] Thus, like others before him, he uses the notion of connotation and denotation as primary indicators

in the examination of the codified signs of film semiotics, because, as he puts it: "The study of connotation brings us closer to the notion of the cinema as an art... In the cinema (the denoted meaning) is represented by the literal - that is, perceptual - meaning of the spectacle reproduced in the image, or of the sounds duplicated by the soundtrack. As for connotation ... its significate is the literary or cinematographic, 'style', 'genre' - the epic, the western, etc., - 'symbol' - philosophical, humanitarian, idealogical and so on, - or 'poetic atmosphere' ..."[7] thus the connotative instance would be the sum of the denoted signifiers.

For a working example one could refer again to Hitchcocks Psycho. A girl in a motel, an unsuspecting victim, is about to be violently attacked and killed by the psychopathic proprieter of that motel, while she is having a shower - this is the denoted meaning. The way or style in which this is protrayed: the slow build up, the change of scene from showering girl to shadowy figure, and back and forth, her busy activity, his stealth, the focus on the shower curtain, from his side, from her side, from his side with knife raised, from her side with his silhouette. Then, as the knife comes arching down one is treated to increasingly rapid 'quick-fire' editing, ever diversifying camera angles,[8] the abrupt introduction of a loud piercing music score, to the sudden halt; in camera movement, violent action, music - these are the connotative signifiers (Fig.3).

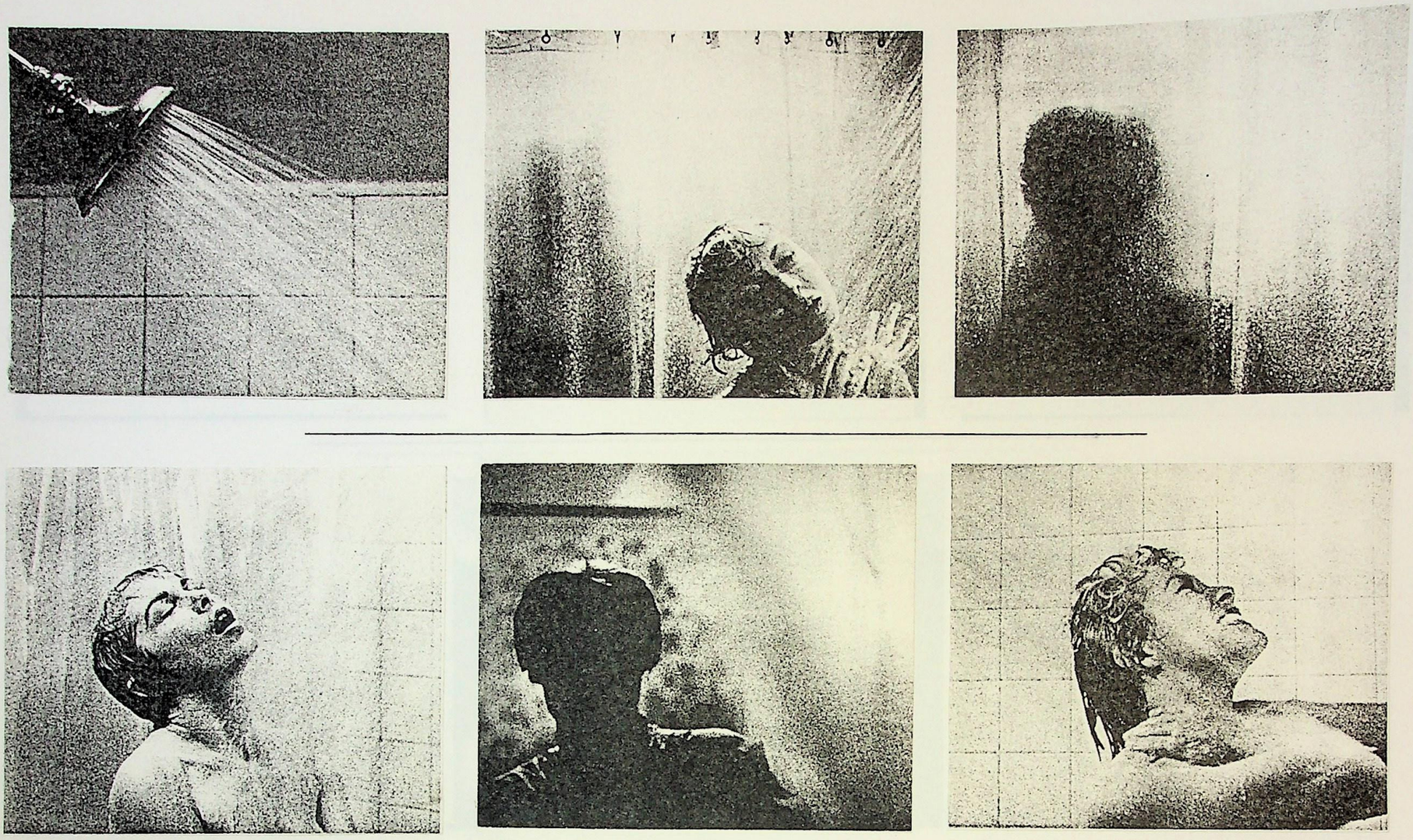
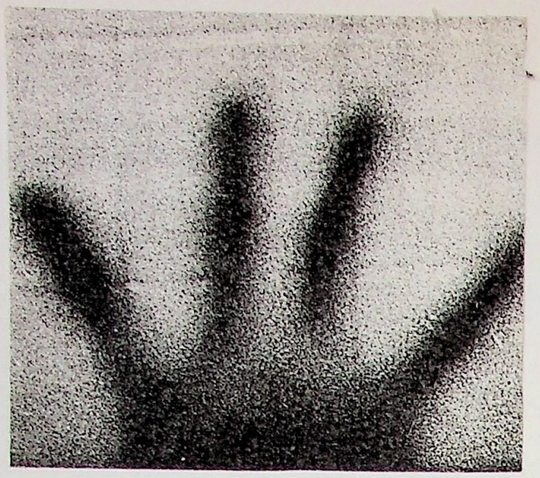
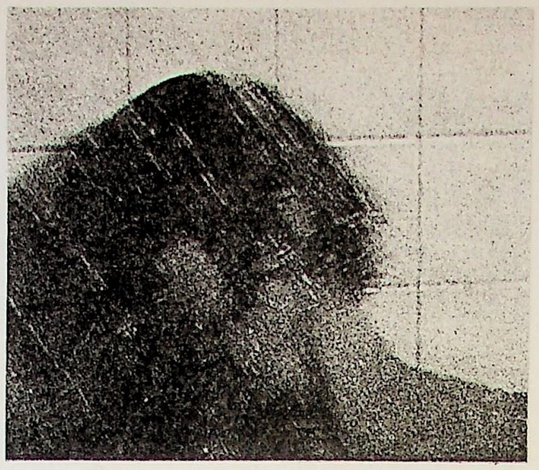
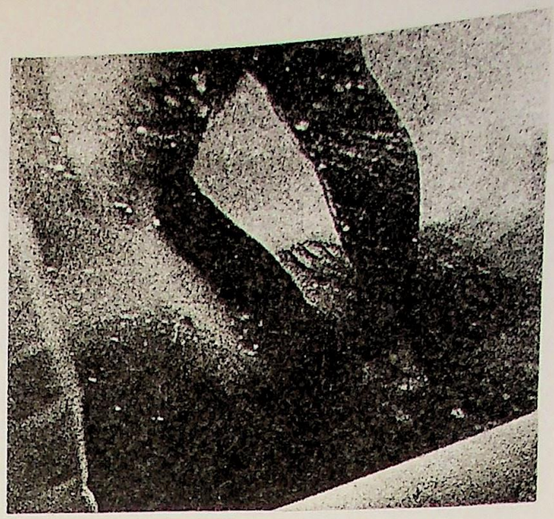
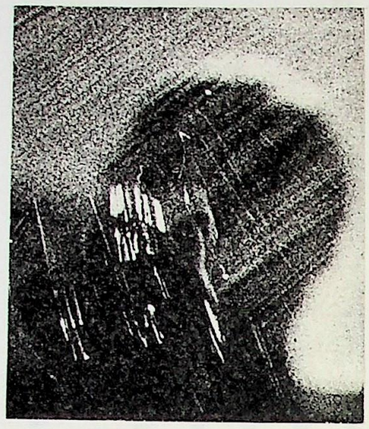
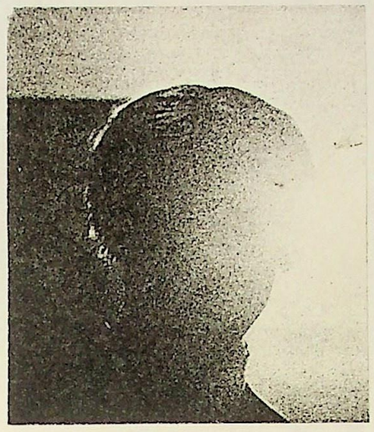
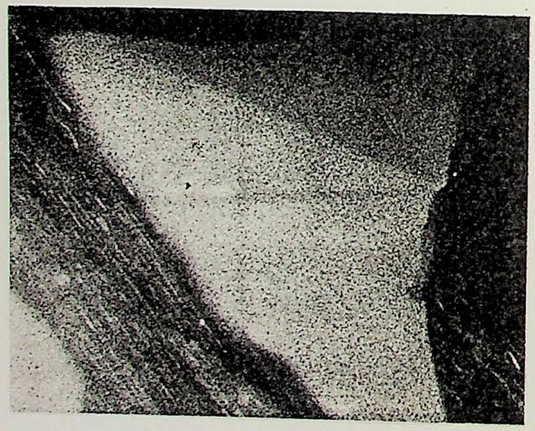
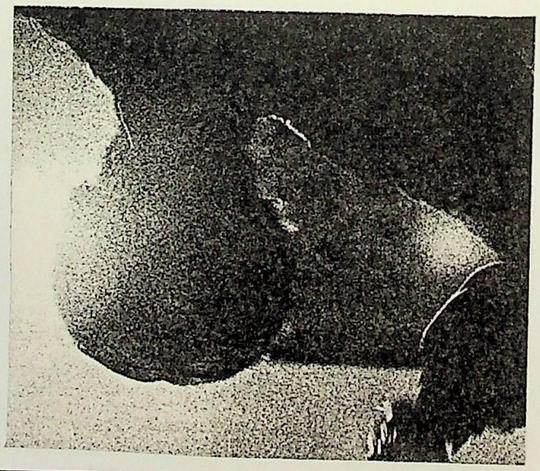
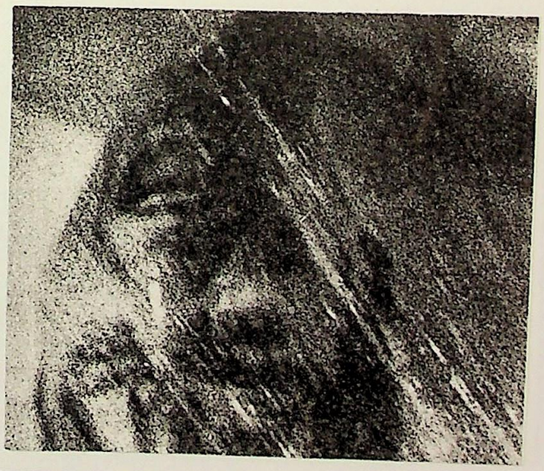
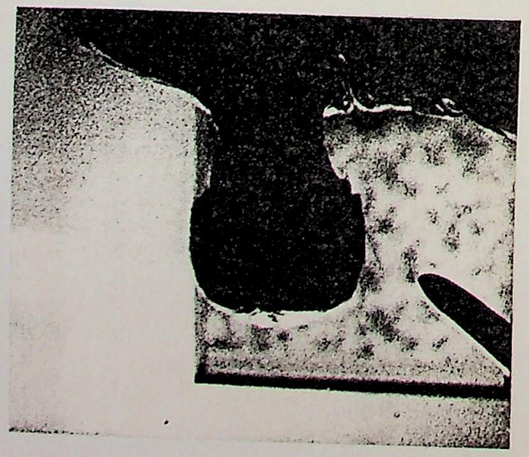
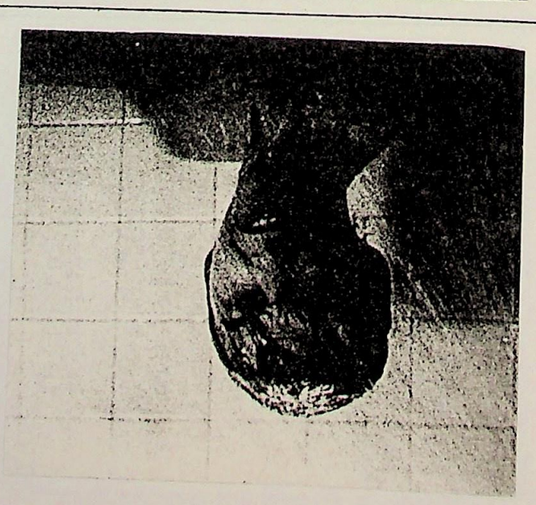
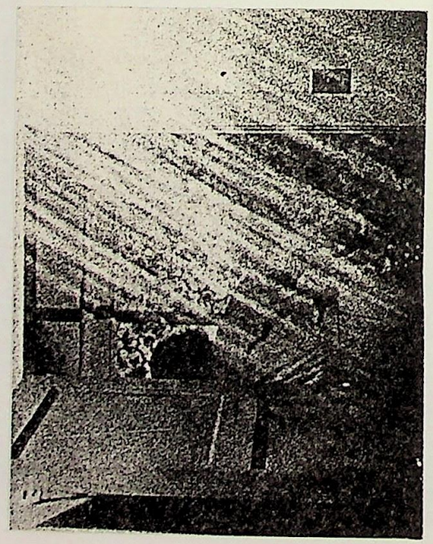


FIG. 3



Historically speaking, painting or at least narrative painting has developed a similar set of codes which it must also be pointed out have carried over somewhat to less than narrative work.

These codes or devices can be both subjective (in the eye of the spectator) and/or objective; as can also be the case with film. Victor Burgin in an essay entitled: 'Diderot, Barthes, Hieroglyph', gives a brief history of some of these devices.[9] Humanist scholars (students of the histories written by the classical authors) in the mid-sixteenth century took the doctrine that the, ".. highest calling of any art is to depict human action in its most exemplory forms; the human body, they held, was the privileged vehicle for the depiction of such histories. "The main body of work which followed up until the mid-eighteenth century is now embodied in humanist art theory, in the slogan, 'Ut Pictura poesis' - 'as is painting so is poetry'. Burgin goes on to write that, as such, painters of the histories had to show in a single instant, that which took time to unfold, said instant must have a singular importance within the given narrative. This important moment in time became known as the 'peripitea', ".. that instant in the course of an action when all hangs in the balance."

However, because of the every changing modes current in any history of painting or otherwise, the peripitea became lost or, ".. subsumed within the increasingly decorative practices", we now refer to as Rococo and Baroque.

Narrative or discursive clarity survived only in the form of allegory and that even that became increasingly obscure as new languages of symbolism, both public and private, rendered it impossible to read a work without the necessary education in said languages.

Thus it was, that the concept of the 'tableau' emerged at the beginning of the eighteenth century as a reaffirmation of the values of ut pictura poesis, intelligable, in Diderot's words (according to Burgin), ".. to a man of simple common sense."

Burgin goes on to mention, in the same essay, that Roland Barthes refers to the above 'pregnant moment' (peripitea) in terms of the theatre of Bertolt Brecht and Eisenstein's cinema, as 'hieroglyphs'. According to Burgin however a hieroglyph is in visual language, uncommunicable in verbal terms, that the hieroglyph, ".. by definition, communicates instanteously and stands outside discourse." However, apparently this definition, defines what Roland Barthes refers to as a 'punctum' in his Camera Lucida, and this in turn refers to what is mentioned above as the subjective eye of the spectator. Basically, the punctum is the conscious or unconscious recognition of a fragment of a piece (painting, photograph, film), which refers specifically to one's own private associations, one's own singular history. As this is so specific and consequently as varied as the individuals in an audience, it stands outside the control of the artist, who cannot know what the viewer will relate to. He can of course refer particular

elements of a piece to the collective memories of a shared past. This loosely, is what Barthes refers to as the 'studium', and is perhaps most visible in the film world.

Referring back to Lynch's Blue Velvet (1986) and De Palma's Untouchables (1987) and as already mentioned, they rely very heavily on an audiences collective memory of earlier films and genres. Blue Velvet refers in general to the mid-thirties to mid-fifties films of Frank Capra (perhaps derogatively known as 'Capracorn') and in particular to the same directors 1946 feature, Its a Wonderful Life. As with its predecessor, small town America in Blue Velvet is divided rigidly into good and evil, a black and white morality as it were. However, in the earlier film the dark side of the American pysche is visualised as a dream sequence, whereas Lynch has it cohabitating, albeit subversively, with the whiter than white 'lighter' side. What they have in common is the resultant triumph of good over evil, though Lynch again leaves his audience in no doubt as to the falsity of his conclusion. De Palma's Untouchables revolves on much the same morality, though its generic precedents are in thirties 'gangster' cinema with a heavy dose of the cartoon characterizations of forties radio shows (Dick Tracy, Dick Barton, etc.). However, while De Palma's work glories in its own history - with much direct homage paid - Lynch rises above this and offers albeit ironically, a 'Jeckle and Hyde' glimpse at the modern psyche. Is it coincidence that the re-examination by post-modernist painters of their own mediums past glories roughly coincides with the same in cinema?

How then do the works of Birmelin and Fischl fit into these 'codes' of narrative painting. With regard to the peripitea (the pregnant moment) it is interesting to quote Fischl, who says of his work:

> "I'm trying to build a situation to its most poignant moment, the one where all the possibilities are exposed. Its frozen just short of a resolved action. I don't need to pin something down. There are multiple meanings - multiple and simultaneous meanings. What I'm doing is creating a situation in which the audience can participate by the way they play it back to themselves."[10] (Fig.4)

This also refers back to the definition for narrative work at the beginning of this chapter; the onus is on the audience to build the narrative from the information provided. John Yau also credits Birmelin with this, ".. Birmelin reveals the ambiguity of gestures. How nothing we see might be what it seems." But what is especially important about their work, in relation to this discussion, is that both Birmelin and Fischl when seeking to address their audience, use not the audiences associations with the painted histories and its codes, but use instead a language owing more to the more recent celluloid histories. It is also interesting to note that both painters paint in a relatively neutral style so that an audience can relate to the image, the scene, without the possible distraction of the touch with which it is painted. Fischl tends to stray somewhat from this 'neutrality', perhaps because of a

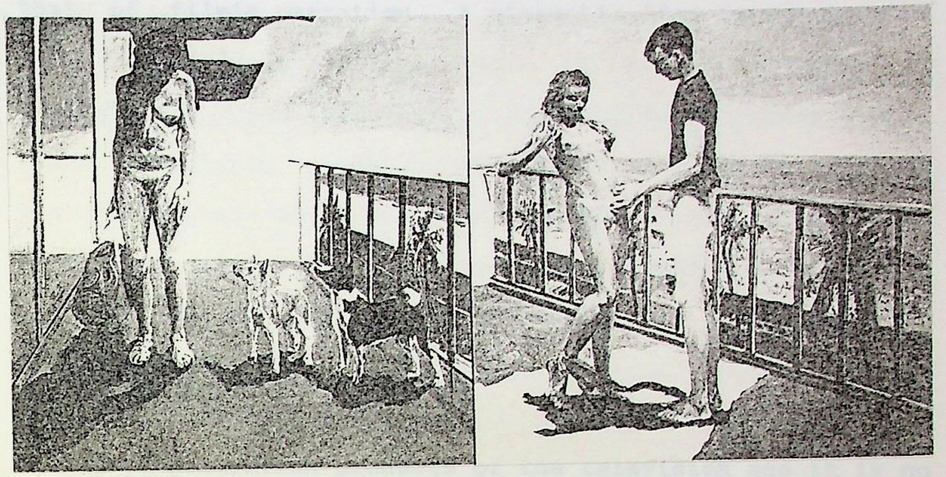


Fig. 4

Dog Days
1983
213 x 427
Collection of Tom and Charlotte Newby
Neenah, Wisconsin, U.S.A.

certain inadequacy with the medium, perhaps to add to the connatative signifiers (another dimension perhaps of atmosphere or emotion). It has also been said of Fischl that his, ".. methods find significant correlation with that of filmic narration. A cinematic idea is constructed and perceived through a chain of images rhythmically imposed one upon the other, a composite of visual clues. Fischl imagistic sequences respond not only to the look of the film, but more importantly share cinema's concept of narrative structure. His visual presentations rely entirely on his ability to communicate and draw the viewer into the story."[11]

As first generation products of the television age it is no wonder that the likes of Fischl and Birmelin should emerge at this stage. What is strange is the fact that the art world should seek to embrace their work. One of the possible causes as to why modernism in painting began when it did in the latter half of the last century could have been the introduction of the 'still' camera and more latterly the 'movie' camera. While the camera became more and more capable of reproducing in two dimensions the three dimensional world, painting sought to avoid comparison, it could be said, by approaching more abstract concepts in increasingly more abstract ways resulting in the 'in-bred', nihilistic, 'art about art' syndrome so prevelant in twentieth cnetury painting. This is not to deny that painting took its natural course, a course perhaps which it could only take in order to justify its continuance. Seldom however did it seek to embrace the new visual

language of film and later television. Pop art made a few brief sojourns into that area but more as comments on the medium (Warhol's icons) and particularily its own. Lichenstein's 'comic-book' cuts owe a second hand debt to film. Though comic books/cartoon strips predate film by many centuries they certainly owe their current stature and previous heights in this century to the advent of film. Though very much a 'chicken and egg' situation, it is more than coincidence that the comic book as we now know it began to come of age in the late 1930's coinciding with the serialised radio and film shows of the same periods. A young audience could then supplement their Saturday morning doses of Flash Gordon and Superman, with further exploits, read in the comic books.

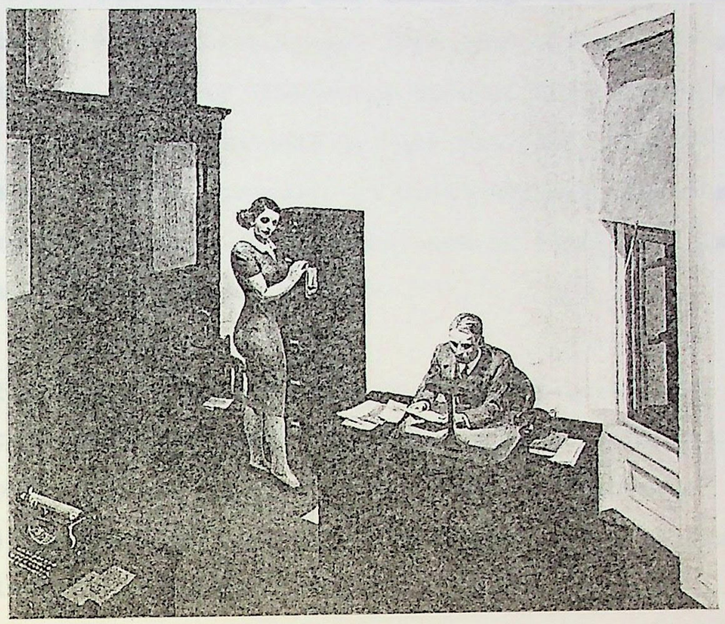
It is also with little wonder, that an art world feeling threatened should choose to virtually abandon narrative painting as it became increasingly obvious that film would seek to take that road. However, a thin thread of work does seem to span the century. Andrew Wyeth, though not always associated with narrative work, does tend towards the narrative in the oft reproduced 'Christina's World'. Edward Hopper a contemporary of Wyeth, freely admits that he is an, ".. especially avid fan of movies ... When I don't feel in the mood for painting I go to the movies for a week or more, I go on a regular movie bings" [12] Perhaps because of its contemporanity and the many physical evidences of that time prevelant in his work, one cannot now avoid even the less obvious associations. His work is peopled with characters and places evoking so many of the

writers and films of his time. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and the slightly later Micky Spillane and Damien Runyon spring to mind of the 'roman noir' period which peaked in the early forties translated into the 'film noir' of the late forties and early fifties, so that much of his work seems half familiar. All the, what are now, cliches are there, the femme fatale, the office interior, the 'loner', the tendancy towards voyeurism (as evident also in Fischl's work), even the lighting of these sets is reminiscent of the high key/low key style of the cinematic film noir (Fig.5).

However, to return more directly to the question of narration, of questions implied, of forced suppostion, for it is here that Hopper excels. His work has a defined stillness, a deliberate drama that one cannot help but to suppose. More particularily in his figurative work one can sense the notion of peripitea. But like Fischl and Birmelin, the 'moment' can only be concluded or expanded in the imagination of its audience.

Roy Lichenstein, though again not wholly identified as a narrative painter, can on occassion, especially in his aforementioned comic strip work, taunt an audience into narrative supposition though perhaps this is due to an audiences expectation of that medium. And Cindy Sherman, photographer, while drawing ideas from a broader span than the medium itself also relies heavily on the medium in its less than 'high art' state, in the role of popular press photography, glamour photography/pornography and 'candid

Fig. 5



Office at Night, 1940. Oil on canvas, 22⅛ × 25 inches. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis Minnesota; Gift of the T. B. Walker Foundation.

snap shot' photography. By relying on an audience's conception of the medium she then introduces broader social issues, often feminist, resulting in work which is almost familiar but which has this added edge or bite which one is forced into recognising and then addressing. Obviously her work most closely resembles that of the film by virtue of the medium she chooses to work in. But she also plays on this by casting herself as model/starlet, impersonations, recreations even of starlets seen in films seen as equates with Barthes 'studium'.

A final point and referring back to the quote from Diderot, that a painting must be "... intelligable to a man of simple common sense." It must be stressed, and in conjunction with all of the above, that this cannot be achieved without the work falling into dismission. Even if an audience were educated in the languages, as they are in film, even if a piece is immediately readable, it must rise above dismission. That is to say that if a painting (or any other object/concept in any other medum) is taken 'en totale', at first glance, it submits singularily to a public vision. There must ideally be a private vision, an edge to the work that lifts it from the disposable, the 'already seen', the imagination of the viewer must be fired as in any narrative medium. The audience must be able to question or else one ends up with mere decoration. Again this edge could be the punctum or the studium or even the ability to provoke a suppositional response. If one refers back even further to the First Chapter and what is termed 'in frame' one comes up with a similar crisis. In film as

in painting there is a limit physically as to what is 'in frame' or 'out of frame' within the context of the narrative. It does'nt matter how pregnant the moment is, how public a vision the studium is or however often one splits the canvas/screen, the art work must always be viewed in relation to a world view. Nothing occurs outside time and space. It can't ever be total in itself, for it is with the spectator that a painting/film has its limits, far beyond their respective frames, but in the minds and imagination of their audience.

Footnotes

1. Charles Eidsvik, Cineliteracy: Films Among the Arts, (Introduction).
2. - see their respective essays in Film Theory and Criticism
3. Gerald Mast, 'Kracauers Two Tendencies and the Early History of filmed Narrative', from The Language of Images W.J.H. Mitchell, p.132.
4. Ibid p.133
5. - see Erwin Pano/sky's 'style and Medium in Motion Pictures" Film Theory and Criticism "In a film, that which we hear remains, for a good or worse, inextracably fused with that which we see; the sound articulate or not, cannot express any more than is expressed, at the same time, by visible movement and in a good film it does not even attempt to do so. To put it briefly... the script of a moving picture is subject to what might be termed the 'principle of co-expressability'" p.220.

6. Christian Metz, "Some Points on the Semiotics of the Cinema", Film Theory and Criticism, p.166.

7. Ibid, p.167/168.

8. - according to Truffaut's Hitchcock, over 70 camera 'set-ups' were used for this sequence.

9. Victor Burgin, "Diderot, Barthes, Hieroglyph" by way of "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein" by Roaldn Barthes. (Essay) all quotes unless otherwise stated from this source.

10. Constance Glenn and Lucinda Barnes, Scenes Before the Eye, Catalogue.

11. Ibid, p.36.

12. Gail Levin, Edward Hopper, The Art and the Artist.

CHAPTER THREE

Re: Film: Myth and Commerce, the demythologising process in film and latter day realist painting.

"Myth is undoubtedly, reality raised to the level of celebration..."[1]

If a work of art has its limitations or is completed so to speak in the imagination of its audience, film as an art must find itself severly stunted if one believes as Parker Tyler did when describing a movie audience as 'criticaly inarticulate'.[2] In any audience however, the majority are perhaps ignorant to the possibilities of what is put before them. The traditional arts, particularly the 'gallery arts', avoid this somewhat by emphasising (whether intentional or not) their 'high brow' position, by placing what they have to offer in galleries, in museums, in the language of a defined minority, in inverted commas as it were. Film, by setting itself up as entertainment first and means to economic gain as an integral part of that, has in its nature the desire to reach as wide an audience as possible and thus as a large mass, the film audience is perhaps critically inarticulate. However, as Tyler rightly points out: "Patrons of all art media may get more than they demand as well as less, and since the surplus is not precisely expected, it may register vaguely, obliquely, unconsciously. Especially is this true of the movie

audience.."[3]

If one believes James Monaco's supposition that, "... the dominent cultural, sensibility has reached the level of midcult."[4], one can perhaps get a fairer conception of today's film audience, albeit an optimistic one, for Monaco makes this judgement in reference to the work of Woody Allen. One would like to think that Allen engineered that rise to midcult status from film to film, from the primarily visual slapstick of Take the Money and Run (1968) to the more literary and verbal tragic comedies of Annie Hall and Manhattan. But if this were so why then did his public so roundly reject Interiors? Obviously he himself had expected them to receive it as the logical progression of his work, implied as is clearly indicated by his perhaps justifiably bitter attack on that self same public in Stardust Memories (1980). It could be optimistic to suggest that the relative commerical success of Scorcose's Taxi Driver was based on a similar mid-cult status, that the audience saw it as a portrait of the ultimate noir protagonist. Negatively it could be said that they were drawn on the then fashion for brutal action sensationalised in the likes of Michael Winner's Death Wish (1975) and Don Siegels' Dirty Harry (1972). Copolla's Godfather could be viewed under similar criteria but this is perhaps being too negative, for coupled with its sequel it becomes clear that what could be considered gratitious violence becomes an integral part of the demythologizing process endemic in Copolla's work. What is perhaps ironic is that although The Godfather attacks the myths of corporate America with

the Mafia as a microcosm of that familiar giant, it takes on its own myths by the very nature of the medium itself. What Copolla presents one with is what James Monaco refers to as a, "...profound - even reverent - reconstruction of a common past.. He recreates times and places that many of us half remember. In the process he helps us to integrate the experience of our own lives."[5]

This referral of specific elements of a work to the collective memories of a 'shared' past loosely goes back to what Barthes refers to as the 'studium' in the previous chapter. More importantly however it also suggests cinema's mythic possibiites. The meticulous attention to detail, the celebration of the banal everyday activities - the wife of the godfather of the title cooking for her family at the moment one of her sons is to break the news of her husband's death - these are what take on significant value in the narrative; for it is around this groundwork that the narrative must hand. The reality of the backdrop must be firm to support the excesses of the action. "It is the status of background that determines the strength of a myth, the status of its perspective in human history"[6]

Yvette Biro suggest that: "Myth is...reality raised to the level of celebration..", when writing on film, which reaffirms the definition for myth as tending towards the fabulous and thus lacking in truth. Parker Tyler supports this by writing:

> "Assuredly a myth is a fiction...but a myth is specifically a free, unharnessed fiction, a basic,

prototypic pattern capable of many variations and distortions, many betrayals and disguises, even though it remains imaginative truth."[7]

Exaggeration being that which creates the fabulous, film proves its mythmaking potential by having, "...among its means the magnifying power of exaggeration."[8] By its necessity for condensed narratives, and the physical look of the screen which, presents one with close-ups thirty feet high, even the notion of the 'epic', point to the inherent exaggeraitng power of the medium. By this, one must suppose, that all cinema is mythic cinema or at least displays the physical manifestation of an integral part of the myth making process: reality raised to the level of celebration. What is important about cinema's mythic possibilities is the full blooded participation of its audience in these myths. Cinema's first half century dictated, "...more than any other single force, the opinions, the taste, the language, the dress, the behaviour, and even the physical appearence of a public comprising more than 60 per cent of the population of the earth."[9] Or as Biro puts it: "A whole generation learned ways of flirting and new criteria of 'manliness', how to be a 'man of few words, cool yet disciplined, etc., from the gallery of temporarily valid pattern of behaviour."[10] It is no surprise then, that with the ability, through mass distribution, to encompass the world and to deliver to it simultaneously the same 'message', that these images on the screen would become the icons of this new art, icons here defined as bodies uncritically

admired. Hence the mythologies of the screen expanded outwards to encompass the mythologies of the star, the cult of that star, outside the roles they play on the screen:

> "The secret of the power of Hollywood gods and goddesses is that they seem to do everything anyone else does except that when they die - in movies -- they die over and over, when they love, they love over and over. Even as the God's do, they undergo continual metamorphoses, never losing their identities, being Rita Hayworth or Glenn Ford no matter what their movie aliases... All that the public demands is what it always gets - the power to make and break stars - but gods have always led basically mortal lives."[11]

If the traditional home of the painted icon is in the temple then its twentieth century equivalent is found in the gallery. But if this is the case then it is one which serves a minority, for it is in the cinema that the majority find their icons. Again this is a question of definitions. Is there a direct equation between the galleries painted icons and the cinemas celluloid ones? The question is not whether the icons themselves are equatable but whether the functions of such icons are relatalbe? To do this one must examine if film can indeed be referred to as the 'seventh' art, and if so, what are its primary functions?

As already mentioned in the first two chapters film draws on the compositional and art historical aspects of

painting. With the introduction of sound it began to draw more and more on literary souces though even before that watershed, narrative film had reached a level of maturity as a narrative form. Music too, was an integral part of presound film and continues to be so. Dance, theatre, fashion and sculpture all play major roles in the final 'look' at what is presented with on screen. The difficulty lies then in the assumption that if all the above are ture film must indeed be considered an art, or as Eisenstein would have it, "..as their (the traditional arts) ultimate fulfilment."[12] Siegfried Kracauer adds to the difficulty by suggesting that what one usually terms as art cinema are either those, "...feature films which combine forceful artistic composition with devotion to significant subjects and values. This would apply to a number of adaptations of great stage plays and other literary work.", or "..films which resemble the traditional works of art in that they are free creations rather than explorations of nature."[13] Kracauer, however, tends to deny that film may be considered an art, or leastways should not be confused with the establised arts. But as pointed out above, these established arts feed (and feed off) the newer art. The problem is significantly a question of commercialism, for as pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, films primary function tends to be one of economic gain. One wonders, with the current prices being asked in the art market, if this is not now the case in the traditional artistic fields. However, Erwin Panofsky offers the following agreeable statement on commercialism in art:

"..If commercial art is defined as all art not primarily produced in order to gratify the creative urge of its maker but primarily intended to meet the requirements of patron or buying public, it must be said that noncommercial art is the exception rather than the rule, and a fairly recent and not always felicitous exception at that. While it is true that commerical art is always in danger of ending up as a prostitute, it is equally true that noncommercial art is always in danger of ending up an old maid. Noncommercial art has given us Seurat's 'Grande Jatte' and Shakespeare's sonnets, but also much that is esoteric to the point of incommunicability. Conversely, commercial art has given us much that is vulgar, or snobbish.. to the point of loathsomeness, but also Durer's prints and Shakespeare's plays. For we must not forget that Durers prints were made partly on commission and partly intended to be sold in the open market; and that Shakespeare's plays... were meant to appeal, and did appeal, not only to the select few but also to everyone who was prepared to pay a shilling for admission."[14]

It is precisely this commerciability that makes film so vital a force in the art world, for commerciability in the cinema means the filmaker is reaching a wider audience. However, commerciability has also been the single most stunting force in the growth of cinematic art. Film has failed to reach anywhere near its full potential as an art

form largely because, more often than not, it does not seek to. When one considers the top ten grossing films of all time, one is not confronted with films by Bernardo Bertolucci, Luchino Visconti or Ingmar Bergman, not even by an Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Joseph Losey or David Lynch, no one meets with the likes of Sylvester Stallone, George Lucas and Steven Speilberg. Whatever their technical worth or sheer escapist values, none would be considered art pieces. Such it is, that there is a division in the film world between strictly commercial cinema and 'art house' films, a wedge increasingly widening the gap between pap consumerism and artistic integrity. the problem with the former that it is of little worth, and the latter that it is denying itself the full potential of the medium which is its ability to reach a wide audience simultaneously. However it is in the middle ground between the two where perhaps most progress has been made. Directors like Martin Scorcose, Francis Copolla, Robert Altman and Woody Allen have all explored that middle ground with relative commercial and artistic success. The point here is that surely it is the aim of any 'public' art to reach as wide an audience as possible. If Bernardo Bertolucci can finance the likes of his six-hour, 1900, on the strength of the relative commerical success of Last Tango in Paris (1973), the problem presents itself more clearly.[15] Relative commercial success and commercial success are often tens of millions of dollars apart, and when it comes to finding the backing, financial and distributive, for the next feature it is that much more difficult. If only a tenth of the audience which watched

Rocky IV managed to see 1900 it would still have been seen to be a failure. The problem here then is that minority, but financially major, influences panic at the sight of a six hour film, let alone one which is dubbed and then subtitled, and covers the rise of communism in Italy. Hence distribution is withdrawn and the original American producers get their wallets 'singed', thus becoming reluctant to back a similar venture. The difficulties then for cinema lie outside the control of the artists involved because of the huge financial risks at stake. One can always cite smaller budget 'independant' films but the number of these which would get major distribution are few, and there are inevitable short-cuts taken because of budgetary restraints.

What then about the mythic possiblities of contemporary painting. Modernism has thrown up mythical works throughout its brief history, though these have tended towards the mythic as objects rather than reiteration or the creation of new myths. Those artists who 'dabbled' in mythology included in particlar Pablo Picasso who peopled many of his works with mythological creations among them the minotaur, the harlequin, cupid, pan and various other art historical quotations from the old masters. Picabia and De Chirico also spring to mind. However, these artists are remembered not so much for the content of their work but more for their contribution to modernism. Besides these works of theirs are perhaps more ironic references to past masters whilst in the midst of modernism, rather than the depictions of such scenes as active contemporary mythic

work. If myth be reality raised to the level of celebration then anything less than realist or representational work tends to fall outside this definition. However, these same works do take on mythic possibilities because an art world hierarchy has chosen them to do so. Hence, such diverse works as those by Mark Rothko, George Braque, Max Ernst, Jackson Pollock and more recently Francis Bacon, Frank Stella, Julian Schnabel and Sandro cia, take on mythic qualities by virtue of the fact thay they receive critical acclaim, are shown in prestigious galleries/exhibitions and thus are of large commercial value and therefore a myth attaches itself. The myths here, then are conceived outside the actual works but with a view to transposing those myths back onto the piece.

If films then, do tend to be the mythmakers of this century, is it any wonder that the likes of Fischl should choose its myths and methods with which to underline or expose the myths of latter day American life. If the films of John Ford, Frank Capra, George Stevens and John Heuston perpetrated the muyths of American life in the first half of this century it is hardly surprising that a redressing of the balance of that perception was to come, albeit as late as the 1970's and '80's. Scorcose's Taxi Driver, Cimino's Deerhunter, Coppola's Godfather (I + II) and Lynch's Blue Velvet created a mythology steeped in a negative reality thus fleshing out the myths. By redefining black and white notions of good and evil, they have perpetrated a newer 'greyer' myth where such boundaries are

not defined between one person and another, but within each single body, thus exposing a darker side to the individual American psyche. Paul Schrader, who wrote the screenplay for Taxi Driver, later directed, An American Gigilo, which explores much the same geographical and psychological territories as Eric Fischl. Schrader's narrative line, however, perhaps because of the nature of filmed narrative, appears to occupy the more definitively darker side of Californian social life, the gay clubs, drug culture, etc., with only scant implication of what may be considered the 'norm'. Fischl, on the other hand, works the other way around. By focussing his narratives in exactly what may be considered 'normal' domestic environs (which may also be considered a myth, propogated by advertisers, of a 'synthetic' suburbia), the backyard, the bathroom, the bedroom and the beach, he is directly implicating what is recognised as American family and domestic life, the very cornerstone of American social and moral standards. Hence, he is not perpetrating any new myth, but rather calling into questions the old ones. Is not the aim of any art to expose, to offer new insights, to educate, and thus to enlighten further, the human condition.

Does all representational or realist art seek to create new myths or expose old ones? Regretfully, no, for realism in America in the last twenty years has tended towards photo or synthetic relaism - endless anomynous canvasses laden with neon, crome, glass and various other reflective surfaces - or the larger than life portraits by Chuck Close whose paintings as John Yau writes "... fit in smoothly

with the American work ethic - the dull repetitive routine of the assembly line..."[16] Though this in itself is a modern American myth, it does not necessarily follow that the painting is mythic, for as already mentioned, Close makes technique the essential content of his work, so that the mythic possiblities are once removed. Another realist strain which perhaps culminates in Fischl is the work of Alfred Leslie. His Kiling Cycle series of the late sixties takes singular frozen moments of action (Fig.6), and attempts to make of them a narrative. The reason they don't work as Fischl's do, is perhaps, because he appears to paint incidents just because they occur. Fischl on the other hand, doesn't paint incidents, but rather, 'moments' upon which are about which, something may occur, and this may be because as Edward Lucie Smith puts it:

> "Fischl of all contemporary American artists, is the one who seems to have absorbed the lessons of the cinema most completely. He does not directly copy its images, but he finds an equivalent for the elliptical quality of movies by leading directors otherwise as differnt from one another as Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Ingmar Bergman."[17]

And this is precisely the point which should be learned from post-modernism, that painting like film (Bertolucci's quote in the introduction) should become a 'kind of resevoir of the collective memory of this century'.

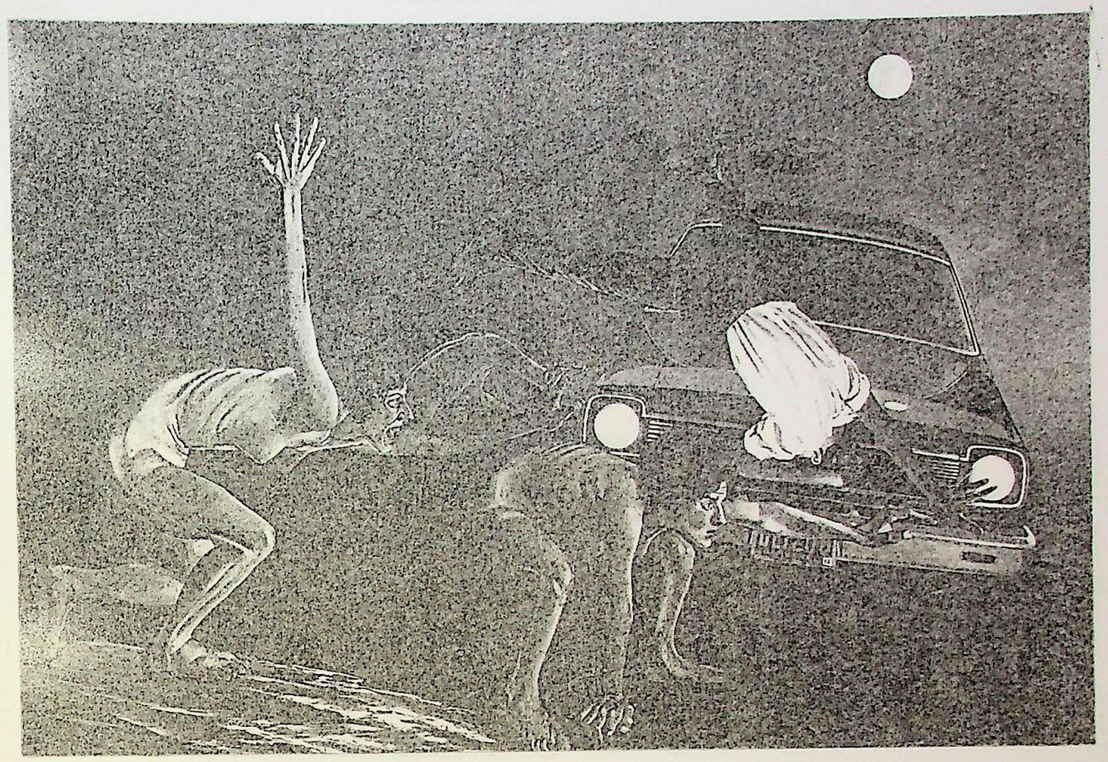


Fig. 6 Alfred Leslie. *The Killing Cycle—#4: Accident,* 1966–1968. Oil on canvas, 72 x 108 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Orchard

Footnotes

1. Yvette Biro, Profane Mythology p.78.
2. Parker Tyler, Film Theory and Criticsim, p.776.
3. Ibid.
4. James Monaco, American Film Now, p.247.
5. Ibid., p.345.
6. Parker Tyler, Film Theory and Criticism, p.777.
7. Ibid.
8. Yvette Biro, Profane Mythology, p.78.
9. Erwin Panofsky, Film Theory and Criticism, p.216.
10. Yvette Biro, Profane Mythology, p.77.
11. Parker Tyler, Film Theory and Criticism, pp.780/1
12. Siegfried Kracauer, ibid., p.18.
13. Ibid., p.19
14. Erwin Panofsky, ibid., p.231.
15. Bernardo Bertolucci, Art, Polotics Cinema: The Cineast Interviews, p.141. (paraphrased).
16. John Yau, 'How We Live: The paintings of Robert Birmelin, Eric Fischl, Ed Pasche' Artforum, April 1983, p.67.
17. Edward Lucie Smith, American Art Now, p.109.

CONCLUSION

If the likes of Fischl and Birmelin, Lynch and Schrader are involved to some extent in the demythologising process, are they not to some degree perpetrating new myths and if so to what purpose? Whether the setting be suburban or urban, small town or cosmopolitan the focusing on details, on the indivudual, in short, the specifics of human existance, what results does indeed tend towards the mythic. But then again the more specific a subject is, though consequently decreasing the audience to whom it refers, the more accurate or 'real' that subject becomes. And this is the role that myth plays; through exaggeration, magnification or 'imaginative truth', one can expose or clarify possible 'truths' about the human condition which may escape one's notice in everyday living. If one feels awkward or embarassed or laughs in front of a Fischl, feels threatened, complicit or agrophobic with Birmelin's work, if one believes as David Lynch does that there is a little bit of Frank (The lead protagonist in Blue Velvet) in all of us, or that society is a two dimensional backdrop in front of which the individual plays essentially his own self created yet hopelessly fatalistic role, as could be suggested by Schraders work, then one is not only dealing in myth but also a reality however larger than life that may be.

Through narrative and the structure which supports it (be it canvas or screen or pure literature) one can build the concrete evidences necessary to perpetrate a myth, if in

fact it is not the only inevitable result of such creative endeavors. As perhaps the newest and certainly the most widely appreciated, film (embracing television) as a creative medium, is probably responsible, whether as a primary or secondary source (through adapting those of other mediums), for many of our society's myths, negative and positive as they are. If as a medium it has within its means the ability to redress those myths, it makes of itself a necessity and this is why if painting is ever to attempt to address such issues it must seek to embrace the language and concepts of said medium.

Perhaps now, in this so called post modernist era, with all creative mediums examining their own histories and current status, they will continue to embrace Bertolucci's sentiment from the introduction and make tangible positive use, of all the materials, not only of its own, but of all other mediums, of everything thats come before. Painting in particular, and again to refer to the introduction, should seek to embrace the popular media, ".. their signs and symbols, not as kitsch tokenism, but as a valuable extension to its own language and history."

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