

THE DISPLACED NARRATOR



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VERTICAL FILE

Film, Canadian

THE FUNNEL

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THE DISPLACED NARRATOR

SCHEDULE

- Programme 1: **SANS SOLEIL (Sunless)**, Chris Marker
The Art Gallery of Ontario, Friday, February 22, 7 and 9 pm.
- Programme 2: **VILLE? QUELLE VILLE?** Midi Onodera
LA JETEE, Chris Marker
HIROSHIMA, MON AMOUR, Alain Resnais, written by Marguerite Duras
The Funnel, Friday, March 1, 8 pm.
- Programme 3: **NEW JERSEY NIGHTS**, Veronica Soul
UNTITLED (Δ), Michaelle McLean
INDIA SONG, Marguerite Duras
The Funnel, Friday, March 8, 8 pm.
- Programme 4: **BARBARA'S BLINDNESS**, Betty Ferguson with Joyce Wieland
SEX WITHOUT GLASSES, Ross McLaren
TOWERS OPEN FIRE, Antony Balch with William Burroughs
LOW VISIBILITY, Patricia Gruben
The Funnel, Friday, March 15, 8 pm.
- Programme 5: **PRIVATE PROPERTY/PUBLIC HISTORY**, Judith Doyle
TRANSYLVANIA 1917, Peter Dudar
L'ANNEE DERNIERE A MARIENBAD, Alain Resnais, written by Alain Robbe-Grillet
The Funnel, Friday, March 22, 8 pm.
- Programme 6: **FILM**, Alan Schneider, written by Samuel Beckett, with Buster Keaton
THE CUT-UP, Antony Balch with William Burroughs
L'IMMORTELLE, Alain Robbe-Grillet
The Art Gallery of Ontario, Saturday, March 23, 8 pm.



INTRODUCTION

Narrative is defined loosely as a story or description of actual or fictional events; a narrator is a sort of story-teller. The global monopoly on the means of film production, distribution and exhibition held by Hollywood since the 1930's has meant an equivalent monopoly on the means of telling a story and the story actually being told in film. This oppressive one-note narrative approach has become rigid and highly codified, permeating consciousness to the point where it has almost become the standard by which all other productions are measured. The demand for narrative change to respond to new perceptions of art, politics, sexuality and feminism is increasing. There are those who suggest that this system is incapable of change given the factory approach to production that insists on alienating 'creative personnel' (writers) from 'technical personnel' (image and sound recordists).

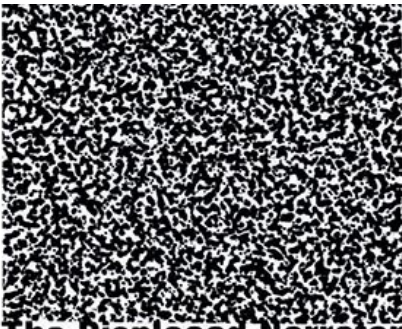
Certain avant-garde filmmakers have sought to eliminate the notion of narrative (Hollywood fiction or otherwise) from their work. However, others have engaged narrative directly, inverting it, expanding it, subverting it, in order to allow contradictions, ambiguities and ultimately a new narrative space to be expressed. The relationship between film and art, film and literature, literature and language, producing film artists and film theoreticians has always been ambiguous. Exploration of narrative in all of these areas of concern and the integration of discoveries (in this case the focus of integration is film) has led to new configurations of content in stories, new meanings for old facts and fictions.

THE DISPLACED NARRATOR, co-curated by Carol McBride and Marc Glassman, takes as its point of departure the 1950's 'nouveau roman' work of French authors/filmmakers Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose writing was influenced by film processes as much as their films were influenced by their experimental literary forms. The curators have made direct links between narrative approaches of that period and the work of contemporary Canadian film artists. In some cases, the Canadian work represents elaborations of narrative strategies from earlier periods; in other cases, striking new juxtapositions of language, text, sound, picture and interpretation have been made. In the essay accompanying this series, Marc Glassman begins to describe a poetics of the new or alternate narrative, drawing in part on the work of linguists Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukarovsky, and leading to a provisional sorting of the narrative concerns and approaches embodied in all of the work presented.

This series is a timely examination of a specific form of expression as moving image artists attempt to describe contemporary individual and societal conditions and define themselves in relation to the dominant forms of the mass media.

David McIntosh
Director





The Displaced Narrator

This series concerns itself with significant narrative strategies that modern filmmakers employ in order to express the sense of personal displacement characteristic of this age. As film is essentially a twentieth century phenomenon, its development as a serious voice articulating the problems now being debated in western cultural thought is an evolution that is most fortuitous. Cinematic language is in a constant state of growth, and it still appropriates many of its devices from older art forms — painting, music, theatrical performance, photography and literature. Although the cinema has a distinct iconography its very newness has encouraged creators from other disciplines to make contributions to its formal growth.

Two paradigmatic instances are those of filmmakers Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet, who initially made their reputations in the 1950's in France as rebellious — and brilliant — literary figures. Their first entrées into the cinema were as scriptwriters for the former documentary filmmaker, Alain Resnais. Resnais and another collaborator, Chris Marker, had already wrestled with questions of cinematic form, particularly the knotty issue of what is "documentary" and what is "fiction" in their short films made during that same creative period. Simultaneously, in the theatre, Samuel Beckett was devising new methods of expressing the despair and existential dilemmas that modernists are still — in part — trying to articulate. In parallel with the 'nouveau roman' work of Duras and Robbe-Grillet, William Burroughs experimented with cut-up deconstruction and reconstruction techniques which would provide a more authentic realisation of his own vision. These artists began the process of creating a new language, one that articulates the attitudes of a disengaged and disenfranchised society.

This series is presented in the belief that the work of certain members of the Canadian cinematic avant-garde — Patricia Gruben, Peter Dudar, Judith Doyle, among others — shows a continuation and elaboration of the themes and formal concerns that were first apprehended in France a generation ago. Each programme note addresses specific issues of this developing aesthetic, looking at modernist approaches towards documentary, drama, autobiography, memory, history, desire, articulation and literary formulations.

What are the central characteristics that tie together the diverse images and sounds that this programme presents? The title of the series is *The Displaced Narrator* and is intended as a linking element for the six programmes. In cinema, a sense of narrative disjuncture can be apprehended as early as *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), when disembodied voices argued over whose presence had indeed been recorded during the fatal events of a previous August afternoon. Duras' self-styled "operatic exchange" still creates awe in viewers: this is poetry, but for a post-modern age. Duras and Resnais transformed the Bomb, Relationships, Fascism, Sexuality, Guilt and Interracial Love from so much cultural debris by articulating much more than the anxieties and associations of that particular period. Through a process of displacement, the spectator is forced to question everything — even Fascism and the Bomb. If, in the end, the text allows for a fulfilled love, it is only with the gravest of societal and philosophic concerns.

From *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, film began to move in startling directions. With *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, Resnais and his new collaborator, Robbe-Grillet, entered into abstract areas previously reserved for fantasists and symbolists. Although Marienbad no longer exists on the map, the situation for the characters was presented not as a fantasy and surely not as an allegory. Robbe-Grillet's intent was to show the mechanics of seduction while Resnais' problems were centred on matters of time and memory within the

film. Whether anything did or did not occur in *Marienbad* became less of an issue for the film than it did for mainstream critics who pronounced themselves confused by the dilemmas raised by this film. Yet *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* is a work of exquisite precision that yields its meaning only in terms of the objects and events that it chooses to disclose. This film, along with Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1969) is one of the precursors of the post-modern cinema. In Antonioni's film, the mystery presented has no resolution beyond that of our recognition of the fallibility of the most sympathetic protagonists. *Marienbad*'s tale of romance is concerned not with whether a particular event has occurred but with the unfolding of a situation as it occurs during the time in which we view it.

If this is the beginning of post-modern poetics in cinema, then what can we comprehend from these two works by Alain Resnais? Certainly, the idea of the narrator is questioned. In *Hiroshima*, our perspective is immediately shattered by the voices commenting on the shocking footage of war-torn Hiroshima. Notions of the love-affair between the Japanese man and the French woman are disjointed by flashbacks that relate her current experiences to her affair with a German soldier during World War II. The visual are foregrounded by the sounds of this woman's description and observations of Hiroshima which have, as a counterpoint, the critique of her new lover. In *Marienbad*, the sense of dis rupture is even more pronounced. We are in a place that no longer exists with characters who have no psychological meaning and who spend their time arguing over whether an event has or has not occurred during the previous year. The absurdity of the situation is heightened by the solemnity of the performers who go through their motions with a perfection that resembles the enactment of a ritual.

A modern, enigmatic cinematic form has been presented to the public. A new critical language was needed to assimilate these new works. The language came. It was created by the structuralists and the semiologists. Although Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and, notably, Christian Metz were to comment on the mysteries of the photographic image, narrative and the cinema in the years to come, for this series' investigation, a central figure is that of the linguist, Roman Jakobson. His breakthrough studies in the field of "aphasia", a disease that causes a disorder in speech patterns, indicated that mankind's cerebral functions operate in binarily opposed systems. Those components — when broken down by aphasia — reveal themselves as being surprisingly similar to poetry's major rhetorical devices: metaphor and metonymy. As Dr. Terence Hawkes has observed, "Both are figures of 'equivalence'". Thus in the metaphor 'the car beetled along,' the movement of a beetle is proposed as 'equivalent' to that of a car, and in the metonymic phrase, 'The White House considers a new policy,' a specific building is proposed as equivalent to the president of the United States. Metaphor is generally 'associative' in character and exploits language's 'vertical' relations, where metonymy is generally 'syntagmatic' in character and exploits language's 'horizontal' relations." Cinematic language can similarly be broken down into particular associative and syntagmatic functions called montage and "real time" narrative sequencing. Beyond these specific poetic functions can be placed the particular element that can be called poetic, that Jakobson's Czech colleague, Jan Mukarovsky called "aktualisace" or "foregrounding". The function of the poetic language consists in "... placing in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself." This the new narrative cinema does, beginning with the jolting display of Delphine Seyrig's voice in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*.

Patricia Gruben's *Low Visibility* continues this examination of the function of language in cinema. Characteristically, it looks at the cinema's grammatical structures in a dual light. The film has no central

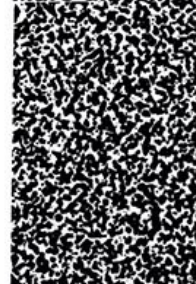
narrator, as the perspective shifts not only from the third person of the audience to that of the hospital staff's monitoring system, but also, to the questing voice of a psychic who is seeking to penetrate the mystery of the tragic events surrounding Mr. Bones. Bones speaks only in disjointed phrases, swearing in a purely Canadian manner. His inability to express himself is a central issue of the work. The authorities agree that if he cannot talk coherently he cannot be held responsible for crimes that took place while he was away from civilization. The search for the victims is hindered by the nature of their demise and now only a psychic can speak with them. The question of language provides a context for the events surrounding the text. The mystery resonates through text, context, filmic structure and narrative perspectives. We know we are partaking in an event that — though describable — is more than the sum of its parts.

The notion of authorship and its relationship to the text is another important consideration of this series. Stephen Heath has expanded on Jakobson's notions and points out that "in the combination of sentences into blocks of discourse, finally his (the author's) liberty grows very substantially indeed." The notion of the text as an autonomous entity exists in opposition to the Romantic consideration of the independent 'auteur'. Heath's analysis suggests that the author's statement may be his own, if only because some discretion has been exercised in the articulation of existing languages. Clearly, certain mythical, archetypal, social and psychological structures do exist at the base of any particular text. Authorship can be accepted only with his proviso — that all an author can do is manipulate the elements at hand into a statement whose personality is reduced by its shared responsibility with the concerns of the audience.

The formal and philosophic concerns articulated by Robbe-Grillet, Resnais, Duras, Marker, and Antonioni, and critiqued by the major cultural semioticians, structuralists and Lacanian psychologists have become cornerstones for a continuing discourse on the cinema and its modes of representation. This analysis has attempted to set the terms by which we can approach the poetics inherent in the new cinema. Narrative displacement is a rule of this game even more than in Jean Renoir's film. Whereas Renoir's characters could not decide who to root for — and neither could the camera eye — in this cinema, it is hard even to locate a narrator, or a "real" subject. Robbe-Grillet's hermetic texts, like those of Harold Pinter, reflect inwardly to their own resemblances, oppositions and ambiguities. Duras' understanding of the forces channeled by desire, as codified by Lacan, have added to the ongoing discourse surrounding the issue of visual pleasure in the narrative cinema. Burrough's cut-ups and Beckett's notion of "perceivedness" represent sharp analytical contributions by two major authors to the question of the role of grammar in film practice. Gruben has followed the modernist idea of subsuming the text into a form that implodes a genre's convention, in this case, the mystery format. The paradigm of this cinema is Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* with its complex narrative strategies, allusive imagery and open text. All of the films presented serve to create an atmosphere in which a new sense of film's poetics can exist.

The Displaced Narrator is an identifying characteristic of this modern screen practice. The sense of dislocation, so apparent in modern life, is expressed by the constantly shifting locus of these films. Sound is often used to foreground the visuals, creating a dichotomy between what we hear and what we see. The audience as an active participant in the reading of the text is clearly intended in the works. The notion of the self-referential cinematic text with its ontological implications is at the core of the series as is an anecdote about modern jazz giant Thelonious Monk. A musician commented to Gerry Mulligan, "I love the notes Monk plays." To which Mulligan replied, "I love the notes he doesn't play."

Marc Glassman



PROGRAMME ONE

SANS SOLEIL (Sunless), France 1982, Director/Writer Chris Marker, 35mm. col. 100 minutes

"Legends are born out of the need to decipher the indecipherable. Memories must make do with their delirium, their drift. A moment stopped would burn like a flame of film blocked before the furnace of the projector." —Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*

This extraordinary film takes the form of a travelogue that proceeds through its own devices to present simultaneous interior and exterior world visions. The external plane — the ostensible cinematographic view — is that of contemporary Japan, North Africa, San Francisco and other exotic locales of the First and Third Worlds.

The internal view, and the logic of the narrative, is rendered through a series of letters sent by a male correspondent and read aloud by a female voice. That neither of these narrators is seen and that they are, presumably, constructs of a "real" author, Chris Marker raises questions about the nature of authorship in the cinema. Marker is a filmmaker who delights in placing his narrative structure at the congruent point where documentary and drama meet. Earlier films by him, such as *Le Joli Mai* and *Le Mystère Kolumbo* have assimilated actuality footage and created literary fictions around them. As early as 1957 in *Lettre de Sibirie* Marker had presented the same scene from three different points-of-view (the Communist, the Capitalist, the disinterested observer). In *Sans Soleil* his technique has reached a level at which the idiosyncratic juxtaposition of sounds and scenery as linked by a philosophic "belletristrique" narrative thread comes together to create an appealing format for the cinema, that of an open text.

Umberto Eco has defined open work as those texts which have an "oriented invitation" (neither coercive nor univocal) to the rather free integration of the interpreter inside a world which remained controlled by the author." In the case of *Sans Soleil*, the removal of the real author's presence and the substitution of a set of disembodied narrators stimulates debate about the nature of the images that we are allowed to view. Terrence Rafferty alludes to the dizzying effect treated by this strategy in a *Sight and Sound* article. "Did he (the critic) really manage to take in, during the first ten minutes of the film, an epigraph from Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday', a shot of three children on a road in Iceland, 1965, a short sequence on a train in Kokaido, shots of women on the Bassagos Islands off West Africa, a prayer for the soul of a lost cat in an animal cemetery outside Tokyo, a dog on a deserted beach, a bar in a rundown district of Tokyo". Rafferty had seen those things — and the exhilaration engendered by the series of text and images provided by Marker allowed the critic to create a poetic encapsulation of the filmmakers' achievement.

It is in the creation of the fictional constructs that Marker has encouraged the viewers to make their own entries into the text. The fiction of the unseen world traveller, dubbed 'Sandor Krasna', his unknowable relation to his female associate to whom he addresses his correspondence and his own imaginings of what other narrators might make of the pictures which he places before us, adds layers of complexity to an already dense cinematic texture. It also proposes the notion that the stories, aphorisms and mysteries that accompany the visuals in *Sans Soleil* are but one set of resolutions to the problems presented by the cluster of brilliant images that are so sensuously apparent in the work.

By draining each image of any one particular meaning, and ridding each of the cumbersome baggage of symbolism, he has restored the natural associative properties of this pure element of the cinematographic art. By creating an open-ended drama, he has appropriated the external view of the documentarian, turned it on its head and restored each image to a pure Rousseauvian state.

PROGRAMME TWO

VILLE? QUELLE VILLE?, Canada 1984, Midi Onodera, Super 8 col. 3 minutes 45 sec.

LA JETEE, France 1962, Chris Marker, B/W 29 minutes 35mm.

HIROSHIMA, MON AMOUR, France/Japan, 1959, Alain Resnais/Writer Marguerite Duras, 35mm B/W 95 minutes.

These films are linked by their meldings of documentary elements into dramatic forms. Although each film is presented as a fictional work, the admission of actuality footage into them creates an interior tension in the material. Duras' and Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* begins with an astonishing sequence in which "real" material shot after the atom-bomb explosions had occurred in 1945, along with man-made likenesses of these events, are shown on the screen while the dramatic questions of the story are being discussed on the soundtrack. In Marker's *La Jetée* the still photographs which form the visual component of the film are, in some cases, reproductions of shots taken of torture victims during the Algerian Crisis. Midi Onodera's *Ville? Quelle Ville?* confronts the dialectic of reality/fiction by showing deliberately unremarkable scenes of Toronto and constructing a mock-philosophical narrative to accompany the shots.

All of these films follow the modernist impulse to question classical form. It is through their mutual desire to shatter conventional barriers surrounding the concepts of reality (Lumière) and illusion (Melies) that these filmmakers can be perceived as imparting a fresh impact on film form.

Ville? Quelle Ville? questions standard cinematic form. Over a wailing jazz score, a dispassionate voice states "It was a city, any city." Documentary footage of Toronto is shown as the narrator comments on events that could be taking place anywhere, at any time. The form which gives the film its apparent meaning — that of existential world-weariness — is deconstructed, leaving the viewer to reconsider one's reaction to certain filmic stimulæ. Onodera's work suggests that a particular set of elements — music, voice-over narration, static footage — create an emotional response in and of themselves.

La Jetée is composed of still photographs masterfully edited by filmmaker Chris Marker. A science-fiction tale narrated by an unseen — and logically impossible commentator — is relayed to the audience. A young boy is haunted by the image of a woman's face and a man's death at a pier near the Orly airport. As an adult, he is persuaded by scientists to participate in horrifyingly intense time-travel experiments that eventually prove successful. Returned to the Orly of his past, the man is inevitably drawn to re-witness the events that so marked his youth. The result: tragedy for the narrator. *La Jetée* is a circular film whose locus remains rooted in its locale.

Hiroshima, Mon Amour poetically represents the major issues of our era. A French woman and a Japanese man have an affair in Hiroshima. (The obscenity of the atomic bomb and of warfare and betrayal are at the roots of this film.) The French woman is an actress appearing in a film about peace being made in this city marred by memories of death. The Japanese, an architect, is in love with her, pursues the actress and forces her to tell him of her past when her love for a German soldier ended tragically at the war's end. The actress and the architect attempt to embrace in, as Duras says, "the one city of the world where it is hardest to imagine it: Hiroshima." Both agree to attempt to build something together in an area that represents the nadir of existence, the null point where science and man had shown how devastating and brutal their relationship could be.

The structure of this film is remarkable in many ways. (Concealed by the film's attempts to deal with important events are narrative strategies that have influenced art and avant-garde cinema since then.) The beginning of the film uses two displaced narrative voices arguing over each other's presence at Hiroshima while the screen is filled with appalling images from the end of WWII. The effect intended by Duras was that of an operatic exchange recalling a sacrilegious event. This musical device is rendered by Resnais in an ambiguous manner fully in keeping with Duras' intent. The voices of the narrative commingle in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish who is speaking — and whether they are discussing Hiroshima or their love affair. Duras has called the film "a fictionalised documentary." She has stated that "a principle goal of the film (was) to have done with the description of the horror by horror . . . but make this horror rise again by incorporating it in a love . . . that will be more credible than if it had occurred anywhere else in the world." — by placing it in Hiroshima.

The locale of Hiroshima becomes simultaneously the conventional backdrop for the affair and the *raison d'être* for the entire enterprise. Flashbacks to the actress' love for the soldier are handled in a subjective manner. Related to the Japanese who interposes his attitude and voice into the commentary, the memory of the tale begins to collapse into itself. The viewer cannot tell whether it is the Japanese or German who is being betrayed and which love is being talked about at certain important dramatic moments. For Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais, the way to deal with the obscenity of war was to render a poetic reality. In doing so they began to create a new cinema, one that would foreground the technical devices — sound, editing, literature, architecture — and posit a new dialectic between the narrative, the images/soundtrack, and the viewer.

PROGRAMME THREE

NEW JERSEY NIGHTS, Canada 1979, Dir. Veronica Soul, 16mm. col. 13 minutes

UNTITLED (Δ), Canada 1983, Dir. Michaelle McLean, Super 8 col. 11 minutes

INDIA SONG, France 1974, Dir./Writer Marguerite Duras, 35mm. col. 120 minutes

"The overall meaning of a film, I think, is both the permanence of this (inevitable) direction and the different intensities produced by its flow through the shots it traverses. And, of course, also the enactment of its end: stopping the flow *here*, in the film, but not drying it up *there* once the film is over — no, *giving it back to the world.*"
—Marguerite Duras

A sense of the past permeates these films. Figures remain fixated by moments that occurred years before. Events have traumatized the various narrators of the "fictions" and they find themselves continually re-examining their central moments. Desire looms large in the narratives, desire that has long since been frustrated. Poetical, non-linear works, these films exist at the periphery of the narrators' consciousness. Disembodied voices and printed descriptions comment on actions that have formed not only the characters in the text but also the narrators of the text.

In truth the narrators are the subject of the stories as much as the purported players. Their comments and reactions to what goes on screen are as much a part of the various psychodramas being acted out as are the actions themselves. Particularly in the case of *India Song*, the voices carry much of the flow of the film, their near-hysteria creating much of the audience's concern for the dream-like characters that parade before us. All of the films present variations on the theories of psychologist Jacques Lacan. In particular, his idea of "losange" — a geometrical structure that charts a pattern for longing and allows for a hollow core in the midst of the channeling of such desires appears to be the guiding principle behind these films.

New Jersey Nights is structured around a repetitive scene of a woman making herself up before a mirror. Her action is interrupted by the arrival of a man, presumably her lover. This sequence is intercut with vintage still and moving pictures depicting various festive occasions. Voices on the soundtrack are neither commenting directly on the actions we perceive on the screen nor creating a separate scenario. Rather, the voices tend to act as a catalytic element which combined with the diverse historical and contemporary footage, creates a poetic combustibility. Veronika Soul's film exists in a continuum. The woman's repeated actions, like the alternate takes shown or told to us, are the stuff that memory is made of: apparently insignificant gestures acquire their meanings by the context in which they appear. The desire to recreate those events are examples of our essential biological and psychological imperative — to recreate our significance from generation to generation.

Michaelle McLean's *Untitled* (▲) replaces Lacan's complicated losange configuration with the more comprehensible romantic triangle. Silently we watch a room, the light refracted through a windowshade, a pair of feet dancing. The viewer is allowed to dwell on these images. The text — at the end — presents a scenario of foiled entanglements and makes "sense" of the images. *Untitled* (▲) brings into question the meaning of images. With one set of facts, they can be read one way; different data would create another truth. This film is presented as a pristine, hermetic work. Yet its structure, the images first, the text explicating afterward, allow an openness to appear in one's interpretation of the images that are seen. Another text could have explained the obsessive reoccurrence of certain objects and symbols in a different manner. Though nothing in the film suggests this disparity, one is forced to wonder whether the narrator's sad tale is caused by willfulness or predestination.

Marguerite Duras' *India Song* reveals, in many ways, the hidden core of this series. Her summary of the plot reads, in part: "This is the story of a love affair which takes place in India in the thirties. Two days . . . are presented. It is the season of the summer monsoon. Four voices — faceless — speak of the story. Two of the voices are those of a young woman, two are men's voices. They have known of this love story long ago. Some of them remember it better than others. But none of them remembers it completely. And of them, one has completely forgotten it. The story is immobilized in the culmination of passion. Around it is another story, a story of horror-famine and leprosy. The woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, wife of a French Ambassador and now dead, might be said to be born of this horror. Besides the woman is a man, the French Vice-Consul in Lahore, in Calcutta in disgrace. There is a reception at the French Embassy, in the course of which the outcast Vice-Consul cries out his love to Anne-Marie as white India looks on . . ."

India Song is a modernist work of romance. Duras takes a novelletish plot, strips it to the bone and reinvests it with meaning. The voices, transfixed by the tale, function partially as a Chorus to the Stretter/Richardson/Vice Consul "conte". They are also independent agents — much of the drama involves the concern that one voice manifests for another voice's possible descent into madness. The setpiece of *India Song* is the reception during which the axis of desire shifts from Anne-Marie Stretter to — in various combinations — Michael Richardson, the Young Attache, her husband and the Vice-

Consul. The losange structure of the piece has elicited this comment from Jacques Lacan: "Marguerite Duras turns out to know without me what I teach." (Camera Obscura no. 6. By this he meant that the geometrical configuration of desire is fully articulated in Duras' text, in the correspondences and interactions of mutual desire and repulsion.) A virtuoso sequence — the reception scene — encompasses the mythic elements of love and death. Duras has noted that the pursuit of Anne-Marie by the Vice-Consul is really the tale of "her hunting down by death." In its complex integration of politics, romance, death and sexuality, *India Song* is as vibrant and as full of contradictions as the vast sub-continent itself.

These films are poetic expressions of the static and forlorn qualities of desire. Just as the commercial cinema presents mythology that people pay to believe in, the works on this programme trade in the morbid fascination many feel towards those that are more gifted, better looking or more emotionally expressive. The films in this programme analyse desire and expose the mathematical deliberations behind the apparently comprehensible decisions of bereft lovers. The need to return and to repeat events is given its due regard. And yet all of these films are permeated with an anger based on the loss of a privileged position, that of experience in a transitory state — the notion of romantic love.

PROGRAMME FOUR

BARBARA'S BLINDNESS, Canada 1965, Betty Ferguson with Joyce Wieland, 16mm. col. (hand-tinted) 17 minutes

SEX WITHOUT GLASSES, Canada 1984, Ross McLaren, 16mm. col. 12 minutes 30 seconds

TOWERS OPEN FIRE, Great Britain, Antony Balch with William Burroughs, 16mm 22 minutes approx.

LOW VISIBILITY, Canada 1984, Patricia Gruben, 16mm. col. 99 minutes

Questions regarding articulation are central to the concerns expressed by this programme's filmmakers. In a century which has never allowed its artists the freedom to take one reflective breath and coherently create a stance before another radical shift has occurred to render that position passé, is it any surprise that a critical by-word is "problematic"? Old forms can be appropriated but to what end? What aesthetic response do we expect from artists while an historical continuum can be manifested — and deteriorate — within thirty years? The temper of modern times is — at once — paranoid, evangelical, conservative, surrealist, angry and disengaged. The problems of language and representation are at the core of the artist's response to these (generally stated) concerns. As filmmakers, the artists on this programme have addressed these issues in their own ways. With wit, insight, power and grace they have attempted to reinvest the cinema with a grammar and a code intended to engage us in creative discourse. By means of montage, found footage displaced narration (or no narration at all), they have begun the process of creating a new syntax and methodology appropriate for this ambiguous and alienated age.

Barbara's Blindness, like Beckett's and Schneider's *Film*, is a meditation on the idea of sight. The film, like all of Ferguson's oeuvre, is centered on the reworking of footage found from old B-movies. Old B&W films have been significantly recut and hand-tinted in order to create a new sense of the meaning of the material. The narrative line for the film is provided from a short film about a girl named Mary who is temporarily blinded and whose problem is articulated by an unseen narrator. Ferguson and Wieland added scenes from monster movies, disaster footage, as well as a series of shots of hands — apparently Barbara's — "reading" the title. With good humour the filmmakers ask the audience to see events and situations more clearly by reinventing the context in which we look at them.

Towers Open Fire is one of a number of collaborative efforts between filmmaker Antony Balch, writer William Burroughs and painter Brion Gysin (see Programme Six, *The Cut-Ups*). Continuing in the painterly tradition of collage, these filmmakers used the technique of random juxtaposition of images, words and sounds to create films. As Burroughs has pointed out, "We were doing something very definite and trying to expand the awareness of the audience, usually by experimenting with the film medium. It's been said that the conscious, logical part of our mind is like the tip of the iceberg that appears above water. And what we were trying to do was to jar people into awareness of the area under the iceberg by actually showing them mechanisms of perception, of course, that go on all the time."

Like *Towers Open Fire*, McLaren's film engages the viewer in the process of perception directly. Displacing the narrator altogether, *Sex Without Glasses* provides us with another context in which to situate the question of language. Whatever attempts we make at formulating a linear narration are thwarted, broken apart and exposed in the process. When words intrude at the end of the film, they are without the authority to communicate. As in the space between dreams and waking, meaning is perceived through the interplay of images, affecting a communication without words.

Low Visibility concerns itself with language and loss. Its main character, the enigmatic Mr. Bones, is the subject of a series of interrogations and investigations. He is discovered on a highway in British Columbia ostensibly bereft of speech and memory. A crime has been committed. What does Mr. Bones remember of this shattering event? Is he really inarticulate or is he faking it? Detectives seek one solution, doctors and nurses another, while a spiritualist might be hunting for something else altogether. *Low Visibility* is structured like a mystery story. Yet Patricia Gruben's concerns are much different from that of the maker of a thriller. She presents us with a case that has no solution, a "crime" with victims but no obvious villain. Reduced to a savage state, her bare-bones protagonist might have done anything to remain alive. His *reductio-ad-absurdum*, however, leaves him with not much to defend except those very same bones. All manner of technical devices are on hand to observe this pathetic creature's fumbling attempts to recreate language recall Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Friday, and leads to a question of articulation which asks if communication implies a shared set of ethics from which to proceed.

PROGRAMME FIVE

PRIVATE PROPERTY, PUBLIC HISTORY, Canada 1982, Dir. Judith Doyle, Super 8 B/W 16 minutes

TRANSYLVANIA 1917, Canada 1985, Dir. Peter Dudar, 16mm. col. 29 minutes

L'ANNÉE DERNIÈRE À MARIENBAD, France/Italy 1961, Dir. Alain Resnais/Writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, 35mm B/W 94 minutes

Memory, autobiography and history form the basis for this programme. Each of these films subvert one's logical expectations of historically based narratives. In Peter Dudar's film, an autobiographical account of a man's experience during World War I is reinterpreted by three female narrators whose presence serves to question the events that are being described. Judith Doyle's work undermines the methodology of the docu-dramatist: the voice-over narration, the selective set of photographs used to illuminate the text. While the events shown prove to be historically accurate, Doyle's skeptical approach calls attention to the fictively-oriented creative hand that has shaped the material. Resnais' and Robbe-Grillet's *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* underlines the concerns suggested by the programme's shorter films. Here, memory and truth become the apparent issues as the film's main conceit centers on whether or not a romantic attachment had been formed in the previous year.

All of these works question assumptions that viewers rationally hold to be true. Observers are trained in Western society to expect that situations presented to them will yield to logical analysis. Ambiguous events are supposed to be sorted out; fictions involving clues are labelled mysteries and a denouement resolving the story is expected to conclude the final reel. But *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* presents no such conclusion. The film exists to be a paradigmatic puzzle, an irreconcilable problem. Dudar's *Transylvania 1917* has as a guiding principle a set of biographical obfuscations. Doyle's film addresses its concerns through a discourse on its deductive process, photography. At the core of these films there exists a state of tension caused by the filmmakers' revisionist attitudes towards the psychological underpinnings of their protagonists.

Private Property, Public History appropriates still photographs and interviews to create what appears to be a fiction film. The title calls into question what textual elements are personal to an author and what are the property of a presumed commonality. Doyle uses voice-over narration to comment on old family photographs, a device often used in standard documentaries. Although the form Doyle uses seems fictional or biographically diaristic, the method of research is — properly — documentary. Doyle discovered a collection of photographs, became intrigued by the photographer whose shadow had been cast into several of the images, and tracked her down to a nursing home. A series of interviews ensued which, when finally transcribed, formed (according to the filmmaker) "an incomplete associative history and discourse on photography." The method employed by the filmmaker, stressing the transitory nature of memory, family and filmmaking, allows for a series of subtle readings of the work. Doyle provides the clue: "Family photographs and the speech surrounding them undergo a change of state." That "change" is historical. As the societal and artistic imperative shift, so do our attitudes towards what a previous generation might have accepted as dogma.

Transylvania 1917 recounts the tale of Denes, a young Transylvanian who is caught up in the events of WWI. A soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army, Denes is wounded and left for dead on the Russian front. He experiences the demise of the Empire and the beginning of the Russian Revolution. Escaping from his captors, he runs through a no-man's-land to return to a transformed Transylvania. Peter Dudar employs a number of mechanisms in order to show this man's story. He uses three female voices to tell the tale — and this dissociative effect is bold and antagonistic. It becomes possible to wonder about the veracity of the adventures that we now understand to be "described" events. How much of what we are told is Denes' romantic projection of what he experienced?

Of *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, Alain Resnais has commented that he could not have made the film had he not believed that the spoken-of affair had indeed taken place as X describes it. Robbe-Grillet, who has testified to the perfect collaboration between he and Resnais, has stated that not only did he not believe in the affair, but "there is no last year and Marienbad is no longer to be found on the map."

Three constructs, three dilemmas: each questions whether personal history can exist in an age where all events are forced by historical imperative to be examined in the light of ambiguity and subjectivity.

PROGRAMME SIX

THE CUT-UP, Great Britain, Antony Balch with William Burroughs, 35mm 22 minutes approx.

FILM, U.S.A. 1964, Alan Schneider/Written by Samuel Beckett, with Buster Keaton, B/W 35mm 22 min

L'IMMORTELLE, France/Italy, Director/Writer Alain Robbe-Grillet B/W 100 minutes

Three of the leading literary lights of the modern age are represented in this programme. All come to the cinema with clearly expressed theoretical concerns. None of them expects from film the effects that they have achieved in drama or the novel. Each has approached film with specific intentions. Unlike the writers of previous generations — Fitzgerald and Faulkner come to mind — these authors have realised that the structure and form of film is far different from that of literature. They have risen to the challenge offered by film and created works intended to be rendered in cinematic terms.

When offered the chance to work with Resnais on *Last Year at Marienbad*, Robbe-Grillet asked himself "what novelist worthy of the name would be satisfied to hand his story over to a 'phraseologist' who would write out the final version of the text for the reader?" His solution was in accordance with principles that William Burroughs and Samuel Beckett would, in their own ways, endorse when they decided to collaborate on cinematic enterprises. "Conceiving of a screen story, it seems to me, means already conceiving of it in images, with all the detail this involves, not only with regard to gestures and settings but to the camera's position and movement as well as to the sequence of shots in editing." — R.G.

For Burroughs, Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, film exists as an art form which has its own set of codes and conventions. Rejecting "filmed theatre" and standard "film practice", all three authors have charted individual courses into avant-garde cinema. Their conceptions are as fully realized for film as previous works by them have been for literature. *The Cut-Up* is one of a series of theoretical works which were signed by Antony Balch but conceived of by a group surrounding William Burroughs. Burroughs has been intrigued by the technique of cutting-up items — photos, stories, tabloid articles, music — since the early sixties. Working with Brion Gysin, he cut-up everything he could, including parts of his own novels, which were reassembled most impressively in the book *Dead Fingers Talk*. Gysin, the mathematician, Ian Sommerville and Burroughs all worked with Balch on the cut-up approach. To Burroughs, the cut-ups were a "blitzkrieg on the citadels of enlightenment." Gysin has said that the cut-up method creates new patterns of thought for people — at best, it can be a revelation. Of the films, he states "They're still shockers when they're shown. People yell and scream and jump up in their seats. They still look very, very new to people."

Although *Film* is signed by director Alan Schneider, he has admitted "from original concept to final cut, it was the special vision and tone set by Sam (Beckett) which all of us were dedicated to putting on film." Schneider has called Beckett "not too surprisingly, it's (Film's) real director." Samuel Beckett conceived of *Film* in the spring of 1963 as a piece dealing with philosophic issues of vision and "true sight" that could be realized only through the cinema. Schneider has described the project as "involving, in cosmic detail, his principal characters, O and E, the question of 'perceivedness', the angle of immunity and the essential principle that 'esse est percipi: to be is to be perceived.'" For his protagonist, Beckett chose the great silent clown, Buster Keaton, who performed the part brilliantly although he admitted to being baffled by the whole proceedings. For the cameraman, who had to alternately present subjective and objective points-of-view, Beckett and Schneider picked the independent Boris Kaufman, Jean Vigo's collaborator and Dziga Vertov's brother. The theme of *Film* is the showing of two visions of reality: one, the eye (E) which views objects; the other (O) which focuses on the environment. In the end, self-perception reveals that O equals E.

L'Immortelle is the first feature film directed by Alain Robbe-Grillet. It is much more direct, exact and erotic than *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*. A woman, L, evading her husband, M, has an affair with N who is in many respects the film's narrator. *L'Immortelle* is set in a highly romanticised Turkey. For Robbe-Grillet and the viewer, Istanbul becomes "a mixture of Pierre Loti, the Blue Guide and the Arabian Nights." The film is structured musically. We are presented a series of events initially through L's eyes that eventually result in her tragic end. Then we are shown a variant set of themes through N's perceptions that are jarringly similar — and yet dissimilar — from the events that we have already witnessed. *L'Immortelle* dissects a certain debauched form of Romanticism, finds it wanting, and proceeds to create — or recreate — a new form that incorporates elements of older codes into a fresh structure.

THE DISPLACED NARRATOR

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● Please note: All films originally shot in 35mm. are being presented in 16mm. prints with the exception of *Sans Soleil* (*Sunless*).

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