

ALPHA, TRANS, CHUNG

Peter D'Agostino

A Photographic Model: Semiotics, Film, and Interpretation

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ALPHA

ALPHA is a series of 8 photographs: a translation and distillation of film into a series of stills, functioning in a semiotic mode distinct from its filmic source, *Alphaville* (Godard, 1965).

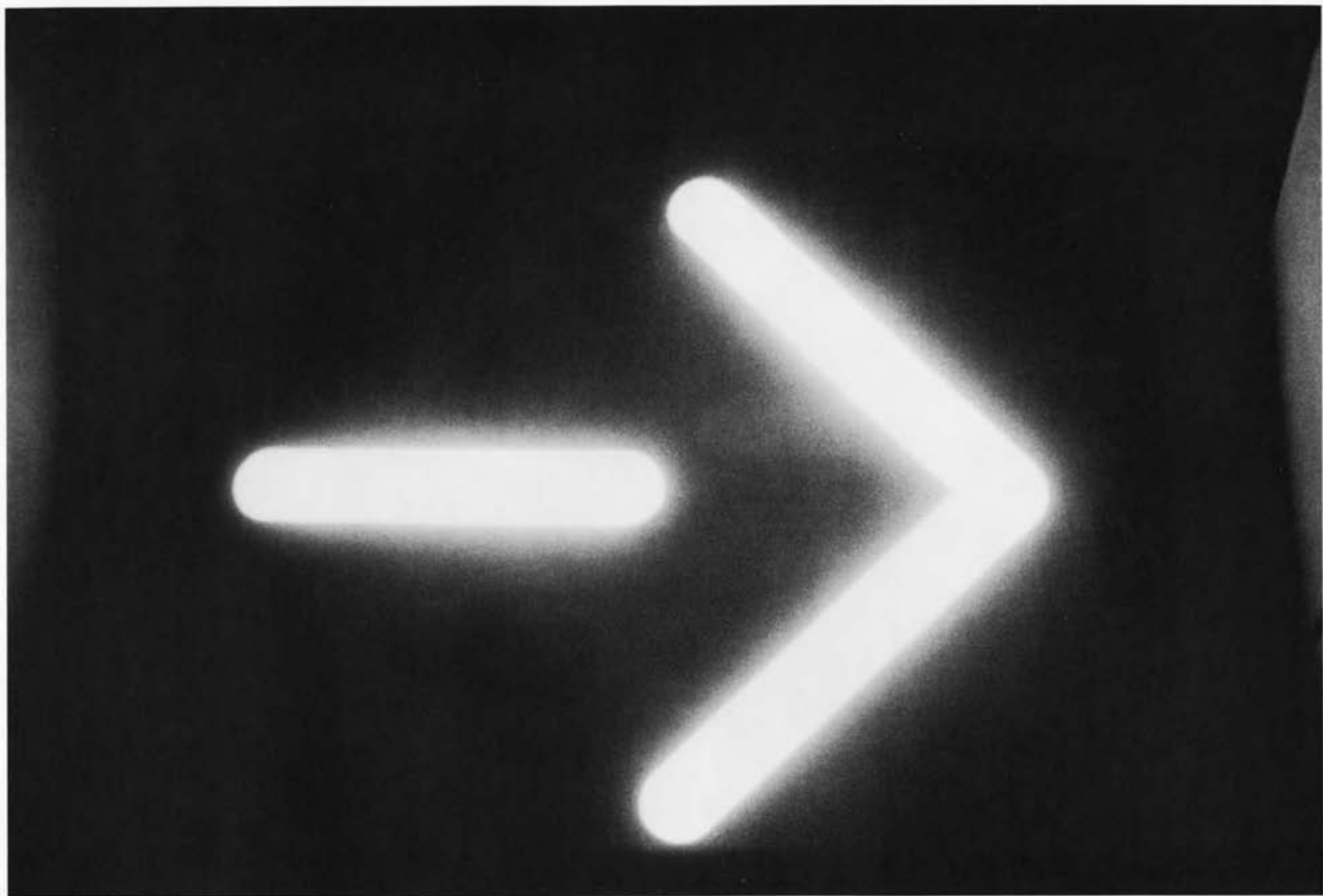
The film's narrative involves the loss of linguistic meaning in a future society run by computers. (Like "Newspeak" in 1984 and the burning of books in *Fahrenheit 451*, the goal is to limit language—to limit thought.)

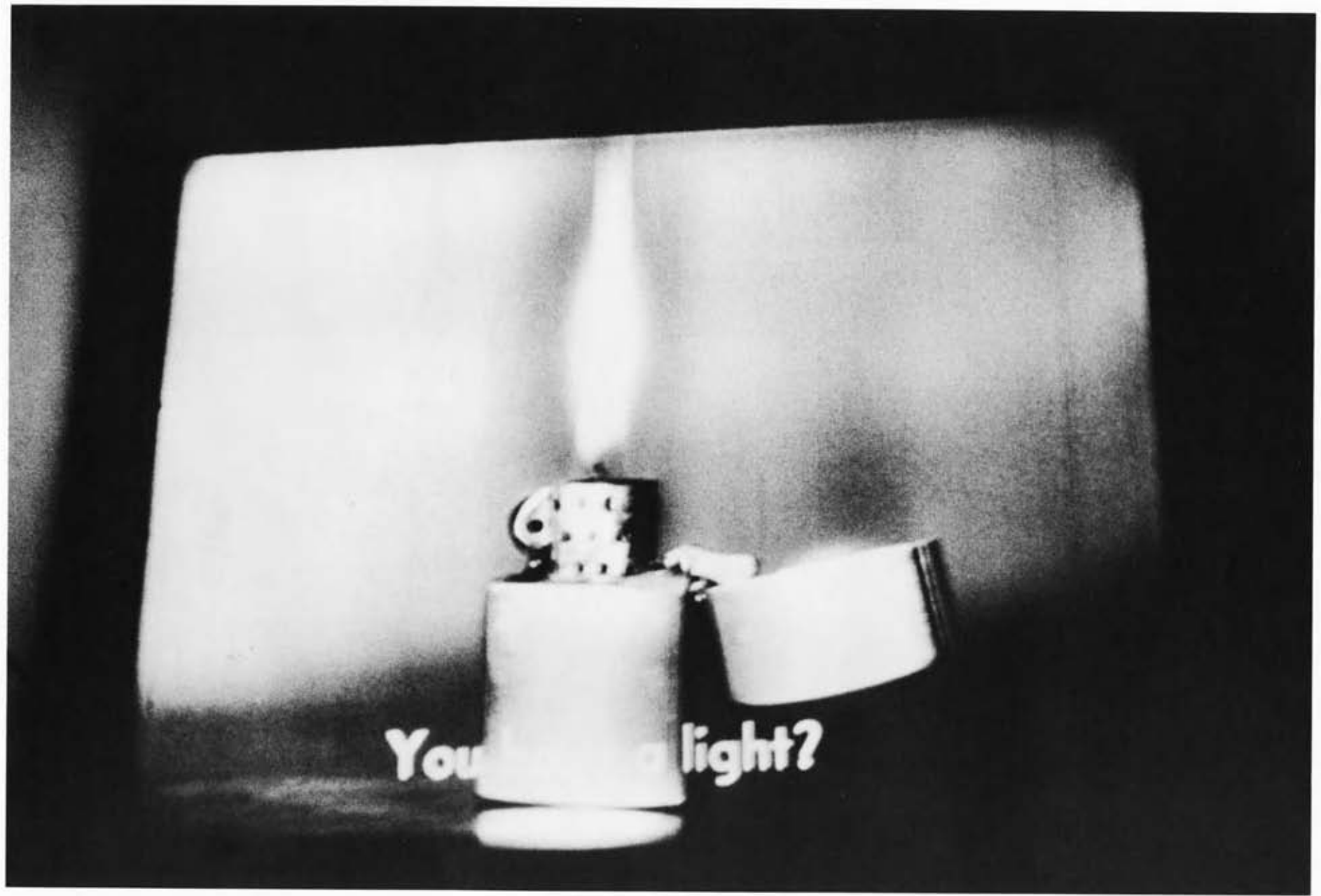
Alphaville was condensed to the 36 frames of a roll of photographic film. Selected from this contact sheet, *ALPHA* is in two parts: *Part 1* deals with the self-reflexive nature of film and photography—light and time; while *Part 2* has linguistic concerns paralleling the film's narrative.



ALPHA TRANS CHUNG

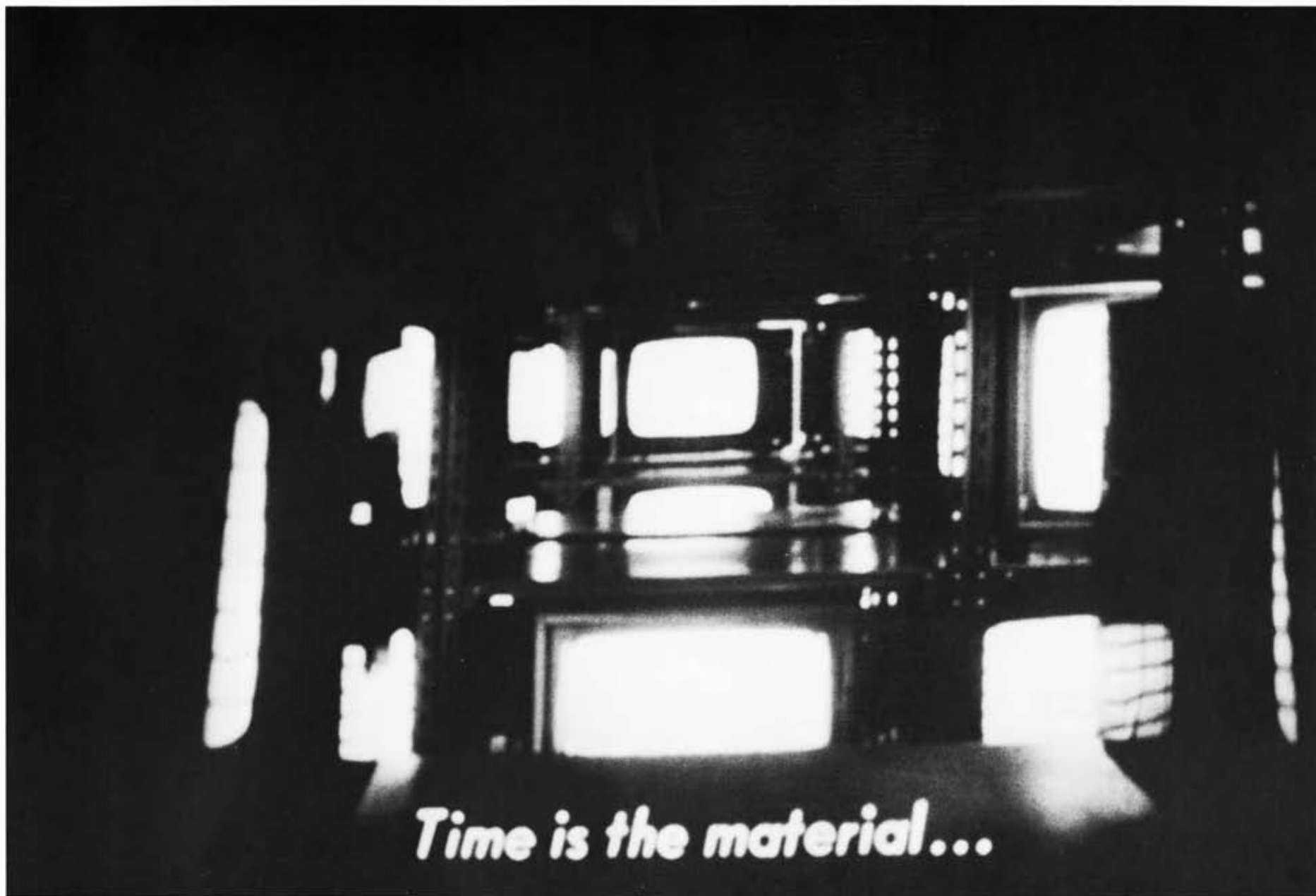
Part 1





You need a light?





Time is the material...

ALPHA TRANS CHUNG

Part 2

ma Sque
esca hier
absen e
wvagues
malau

imbroglio
dorm. — r
cens ■ ré
nost — algie
~~am~~ te joureuse

The meaning of words...
VILLE



...words disappear. they are
condemned.



There is nothing more to explain.

FIN

TRANS

TRANS was originally exhibited as part of a photographic and video installation incorporating Alain Robbe-Grillet's film *Trans-Europ Express*.

While traveling on a train from Paris to Antwerp, three people: a writer (Robbe-Grillet, himself), a director, and a script-girl plan a film. Aspects of fantasy and reality are intermingled within a mystery plot that remains unresolved at the film's conclusion.

The screening of *Trans-Europ Express* and a videotape analysis were intercut with a live-monitoring of the projected film image and the audience. The photographs were shown sequentially during each of the three reel changes completing the sequence by the film's end. *TRANS* is a meta-structure of its source: a reflection of the narrative and formal concerns of the film.

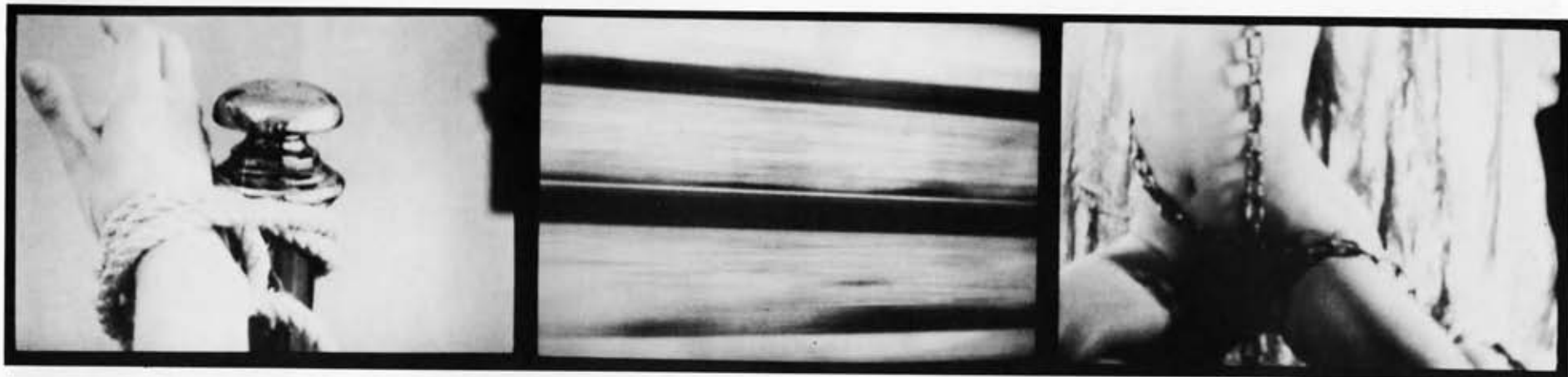
ALPHA TRANS CHUNG



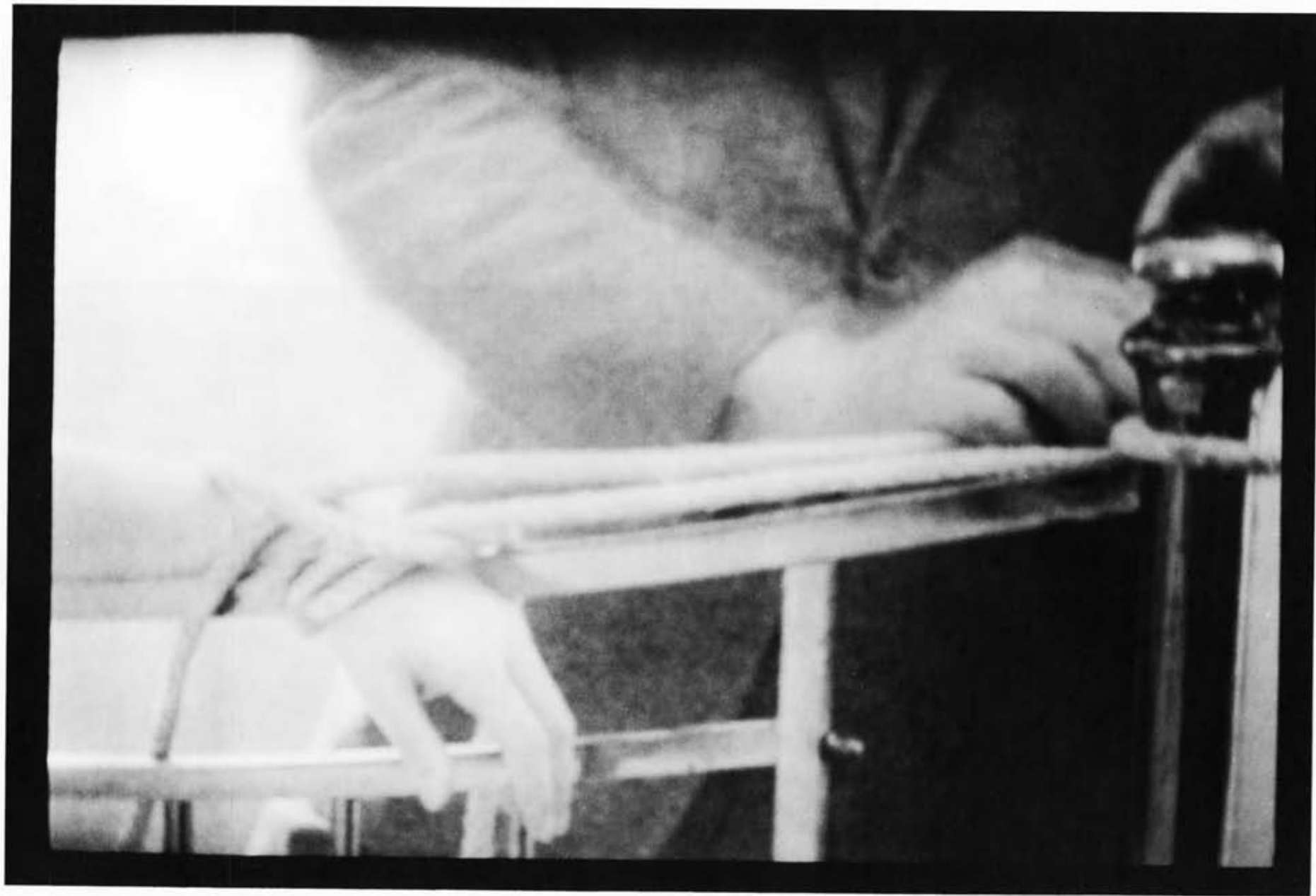
















ALPHA TRANS **CHUNG**

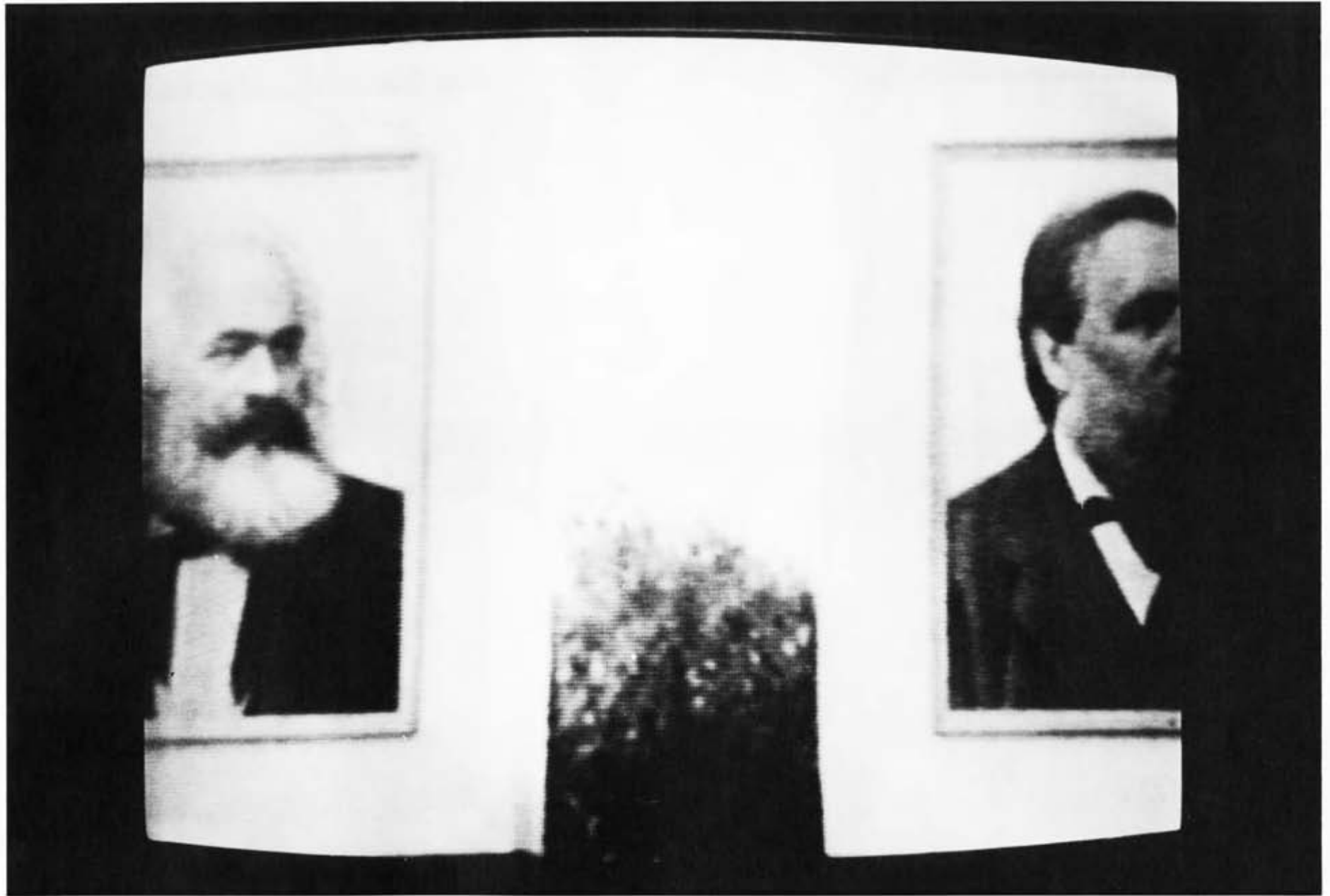
CHUNG

CHUNG: "Still" Another Meaning incorporates photographic and written texts concerning Antonioni's China film *Chung Kuo*.

The opening segment of the film focuses primarily on Peking's historic Tien An Men Square. Here, the everyday ritual of picture-taking and people casually moving about are filmed in the presence of the large scale portraits of Marx and Engels, Lenin and Stalin which overlook the square.

My investigation of this four-minute sequence includes questions raised by the Chinese government regarding the film's representation of China, a reply from the filmmaker, as well as photographs shot from videotapes of a television screening of the film. Within the broader socio-political controversy, *CHUNG: "Still" Another Meaning* presents the issue of the film's depiction of "reality" and further explores the relationship of still photographs and the film experience.

ALPHA TRANS **CHUNG**



CHUNG: “Still” Another Meaning*

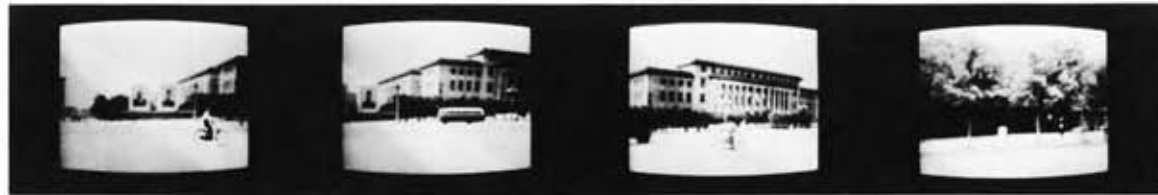
Chung Kuo is Michelangelo Antonioni's TV film documentary on China. Filmed by invitation of the Chinese government in 1972, *Chung Kuo* was later banned by the New China Agency.

Four aspects of the controversy that surrounds the film are outlined below:

1. Stills from the opening four-minute segment of the film.
2. A transcript of Antonioni's narration from this segment.
3. An excerpt from *A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks—A criticism of M. Antonioni's anti-China film 'China.'* *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily) commentator.
4. The filmmaker's reply in *Antonioni After China: Art Versus Science* by Gideon Bachmann, *Film Quarterly*, Summer 1974.

*The still, then, is the fragment of a second text whose being never exceeds the fragment; film and still meet in a palimpsest relation without being able to say that one is above the other or that one is extracted from the other. Finally the still dissolves the constraint of filmic time; this constraint is a powerful one, it still forms the obstacle to what we might call the adult birth of the film (born technologically, sometimes even esthetically, the film is yet to be born theoretically). For written texts—unless they are extremely conventional, utterly committed to the logico-temporal order—the reading time is free; for the film, it is not, since the image cannot proceed either faster or slower, without losing its perceptual figure. The still, by instituting a reading which is at once instantaneous and vertical flouts logical time (which is only an operative time); it teaches us to disassociate technological constraint (the film's projection) from the authentically filmic, which is the “indescribable” meaning. Perhaps it is *this other text* (here derived from stills) whose reading Eisenstein called for when he said that “the film must not be simply looked at and listened to, but it must be studied by eye and ear alike.” *The Third Meaning Notes on Some of Eisenstein's Stills*. Roland Barthes, *Artforum*, January 1973. Translated by Richard Howard.

1.



2. *"Tien An Men Square, a day in May. We've begun our brief trip through modern day China by setting up our cameras here. The song you just heard says, 'I love Tien An Men Square.' For the Chinese, this is the center of the world: 'The door to celestial peace' as it is called, in the heart of Peking and Peking is the political center of China and China is the 'Chung Kuo,' the ancient core of civilization—the country at the middle of the world. This is the square of the parades, the speeches. We chose to be here on an ordinary day when the Chinese come and line up to have their pictures taken. These people, the Chinese people, more so than the country are the protagonists of our film notations. We didn't try to understand China and we don't pretend to explain it. We only want to begin to observe this vast repertory of faces, gestures, customs and moods probably quite foreign to us.*

Arriving from Europe, we imagined ourselves scaling mountains, crossing deserts, but China is, for the most part, inaccessible and forbidden even though the Chinese have opened a few doors, even though they play political ping-pong. Our companions politely, but firmly insist that we follow only limited itineraries.

Tien An Men is a huge space, over 93 acres. The portraits of the fathers of Marxism overlook the square: Marx and Engels. Even though the square has an air of imperial solemnity, it did not exist during the time of the great dynasties, it was born later under the pressure of political necessity. A popular republic was proclaimed here; and it was here that the waves of Red Guards passed by marching for the cultural revolution. Lenin and Stalin are also here, of course.

We start driving along a boulevard that leads away from Tien An Men Square. The driver stops suddenly and informs us that we can't film on this particular road. Our interpreter isn't with us at the moment, so, with the help of many gestures we ask, why not? But the driver doesn't answer. As you can see we went on shooting; and then we realised why it wasn't permitted. That is the entrance to a park, and inside the park is the home of Mao Tse Tung."

3. "It seems quite natural that Tien An Men Square is shown as the film begins. In fact, this is designed to serve the reactionary theme of the 'documentary.' The narrator says: 'Peking is the political and revolutionary center of China,' 'the People's Republic was proclaimed here,' 'here passed the waves of Red Guards marching for the cultural revolution!!' Then the film leads the spectators 'away from the square' to 'observe' China, supposedly to see what the Chinese revolution has brought the Chinese people. A series of reactionary scenes follow, distorting new China beyond recognition. This structure and composition of the film is designed solely for the purpose of concentrating its attack on the revolution led by the Communist Party of China. And here lies the nub of the film—reviling the revolution, negating it and opposing it."

4. "But that is our way of looking at things, from an individualistic viewpoint. That is the point of departure that our own social context creates. When certain aspects of reality fascinate me, my first instinct is to record them. We, as descendants of Western civilization, point our cameras at things that surround us, with a certain trust in the interpretative capacities of the viewer."





















APPENDICES

Syntactics and the on-going work of PETER D'AGOSTINO

Rae Blakeney

To communicate with one another we rely so heavily on the use of signs as the symbolic means of conveying our experience or message, that in our century elaborate theories have been devised to study the uses and functions of signs themselves. It is logical, if not inevitable, that "sign-makers" of any discipline—physical or social sciences or the visual arts—would devote considerable attention to the precepts defined by semiotic. Film and video artist, Peter D'Agostino, is this kind of sign-maker. The structure of language as a communicative sign and the abstract "language" of the visual symbol provide a point of departure in his work. The inter-disciplinary relevance of his concerns seems especially appropriate to his newly assumed faculty position at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

Since 1976, D'Agostino has been working on three major installation pieces titled, "ALPHA, TRANS-EUROP EXPRESSED" and "CHUNG: Still Another Meaning." Each was conceived while the artist was still residing in California and each has been exhibited already. But they may be said to be in a state of evolution. They change with each showing, sometimes with respect to circumstances occurring between exhibitions but, especially, they are responsive to the possibilities presented by the (gallery) space in which they are shown. In other words, there is a body of work, but each installation is new.

"ALPHA" was first shown at LaMamelle Art Center, San Francisco in a "Photography and Language" exhibition and is perhaps D'Agostino's most widely known piece (subsequently included in two other California exhibitions, then at Tokyo's Kemein Art Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art, Bologna). But the clue to its meaning lies in the context of its premier showing. It is about the interrelationships of various

means of symbolic communication, visual/verbal and in terms of the media—not the differences between—but the similarities shared by film, photography and video.

The film source for this piece is Godard's "Alphaville" (1965). The visual aspect of the film provided the material for the first step in D'Agostino's piece. While viewing the film he captured thirty-six images on one continuous roll of 35 mm film. His criteria for image selection were that they be, visually, of a highly communicative nature, that they have the immediacy of a symbol. These "stilled frames" were presented on a contact sheet as a referent to the film.

For the next step the artist took his cue from the narrative content of the film. "Alphaville" is about the loss of meaning in language in a "1984 world" where computers objectively perform the operations of society. In a move that corresponds to the "disappearance of words" D'Agostino distilled the symbolic images taken from the film by selecting eight crucial photographs. Collectively, the eight images signify "light" (important as the basis for film processes, but also relevant to the linguistic context as "enlightenment"), "time, language and signs." Thus, he made a new statement that may be traced to its source but at the same time, syntactically, has a transformed meaning.

On another level the technical aspects of the film provide a springboard to explore unexpected correlations. The foreign film necessarily incorporates elements of written narrative in the form of sub-titles added to the film. So, while the experience of the film involves spoken French, the installation piece *photogramme*¹ presents the stilled (and transformed) English caption.

But "meaning lost in translation" is restored with new meaning as the final selected images release their messages. Just as, syntactically, the terms gain new meaning among themselves in relation to one's responses to the signs,² the layering of structures in

the work presents multiplying possibilities. As an example of the way a work may change as a consequence of the potential inherent in its own form and process, "ALPHA" was originally shown only as photo-stills of film. But the stopping of action, interruption of time, also suggest their restoration. In a recent installation the artist used a video sequence with actions related to the photographs, to reinstate movement and time to the work. It returned certain qualities of the film to the piece, but did not return the viewer to the film, itself.

It is no accident that the documentation of "ALPHA" includes a quote from a work by the linguistic structuralist, Noam Chomsky. It is a fundamental contention of Chomsky that language provides the structure by which data from the external world is interpreted.³ The connection between verbal and visual meaning is examined in a sequence in the film selected by D'Agostino. One photograph presents images of words written in such a way that they become pictographs of their meaning: "escalier" is written with the second syllable one level higher than the first; a wavy line eventually becomes the first letter in "vagues"; the "t" is missing from "absente." If Chomsky is correct that the function of language has a direct bearing on the way we order and interpret our perceptions—it must include, no doubt, our perceptions of works of art!

D'Agostino's other current "works in continuation" also have as their starting point a film made by somebody else but each unwinds in a different direction. "TRANS-EUROP EXPRESSED" and "CHUNG" have both been shown at the Cabrillo College Art Gallery, Aptos, California and upcoming exhibitions are planned through 1978.

In "TRANS" D'Agostino includes the source film (Robbe-Grillet's "Trans-Europ Express") as part of the actual piece. Projected on a screen at a 45 degree angle to the seated viewing audience it functions as a continual referent to the work they are viewing. A video

monitor placed directly in front of the viewers shows a tape of the Robbe-Grillet film that was earlier processed through an "Athena" analytic projector, to slow the action. The "Athena" process creates a streaking distortion of the image and actors' movements marked in space by a visible trail of light.

The tape and film systems are of different durations but their projection time is carefully controlled by the artist so that the two media catch up and pass each other at precisely the moment in the film when two figures, one by one, pass a third coming from the opposite direction in a corridor of the Trans-Europ Express. In their passing the film records multiple images on both sides of the figures reflecting in the window glass of the train. The piece creates an analogous situation with the two media reflecting each other on either side of the viewer's corridor of vision.

When both systems are stopped for an intermission the action is suspended in photograms, this time, of the video portion. When the performance resumes the artist fills a second video monitor with an on-the-spot taping of the film. His actions are dictated by the movement of the camera in the original film: if it pans a shot to the left, then D'Agostino pans the surface of the film in the same direction. But the result for the observer is similar to that achieved in the still photographs. The images appear extracted from their original context.

Although a primary concern of the work rests in the technical aspects of the media it has extended implications for the viewer. The concurrent media overlay on each moment insists that the viewer assume an active role in ordering the experience of the work. The challenge is particularly demanding in the sequence of the artist's live taping of the film. The meaning of the images' interrelationships is initially suspected to be derived only from their relative positions to each other. But, in fact, the images manifest as evidence of the operation of a system not

immediately apparent to the observer. This aspect has a recurring parallel in life situations where a surface montage of events does not readily reveal an underlying casual relationship.

In "CHUNG" D'Agostino keeps the precedent established in the two other works of this type, letting the source film determine the tone and the "moves." Antonioni's "Chung Kuo" was filmed in 1972, at the request of the Chinese government as a documentary for TV. However, as a result of ensuing controversy the film was eventually banned by the New China Agency.

D'Agostino's piece consists of stills from the opening four minutes of the film, with Antonioni's accompanying narration for that segment. The third and fourth parts are an excerpt from a review of the documentary that appeared in the "People's Daily" (titled, "A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks—A Criticism of M. Antonioni's anti-China Film 'China' ") and the film maker's reply published in *Film Quarterly*, 1974.

D'Agostino picks up the earlier thread: (problems in translation) and gives it another twist (problems in political communication). In overlaying a social structure the work becomes more than a metaphor to a life situation. It expands amoeba-like to absorb its own context. The political "performance" becomes part of the piece.

The "art and life" issues "CHUNG" raises are many. What is the role of film in the recording of history—or the *shaping* of it when shown to the world? Can there be an objective documentary (how did history work on the documentor)? Does a work of art present a more truthful view?

Future installations of the work may include a video documentation of the artist's process taken from a recent local TV airing of the documentary. D'Agostino taped the opening segment directly from his set, freeze-framing the previously taken still shots, as they appeared.

"CHUNG" is "familiar" in the sense that it causes us to recall the other works D'Agostino has presented us through similar procedures. But the similarity is confounding because each time we turn a familiar corner the message confronts us differently or comes through a different mechanism. We find ourselves spiraling through labyrinthian layers of visual/conceptual forms, each turn suggesting two more possibilities. Not only is each piece an unfolding reflecting on its source but each work also serves to explain or add a dimension to the others. In this way D'Agostino's art appears to be part of an endless continuum. A reverberating process has been generated that could continue indefinitely, but always returns to its creator.

1. Christian Metz, "Trucage and the Film," *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 1977, Vol. 3—No. 4, p. 663.
2. C.W. Morris, "Foundations of the Theory of Signs," *Foundations of the Unity of Science*, Vol. 1—No. 2, p. 17. University of Chicago Press, 1966.
3. Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, pp. 49-60. Mouton and Company, The Hague, Paris, 1966.

Rae Blakeney was a contributing editor of *Midwest Art*. She is currently living in Santa Barbara, California.

Order and Disorder in Film and Fiction

Alain Robbe-Grillet

Translated by Bruce Morrissette

The question of order and disorder in the narrative has been bothering me for some time. More and more I see its importance in my works, in the works of the contemporary world—even outside of literature, in cinema, in painting, in music—but at the same time what also concerns me is the ambiguity, that is, the changing aspect, the shifting side of this question. And since I have not myself up to now tried to give form to a theoretical exercise on this question—that is, I have not written a critical essay on the problem—it is possible that I may lose my way along the path. But that is not important. I would even say that it would be better, since it would be in the very image of the project of the discourse in question.

You have no doubt noticed that, beginning with my first novels and in all the novels that have followed, there are characters who are interested in creating order. They are often secondary characters, and their activity might seem to be somewhat humorous (but one must beware of humor since it is often what is most serious). In my first novel, *Les Gommages*, there is a character called Garinati who arranges objects on the mantelpiece. He moves them about to try to find the best order, and it is this kind of activity which continues from novel to novel with an astonishing persistence. Another character in *La Maison de rendez-vous*, one of my latest novels, engages in a similar activity, all of a sudden, somewhere along a page. I notice at the same time that this problem has bothered other authors of the Nouveau Roman. There is a novel by Claude Ollier called *Le Maintien de l'ordre*; the American edition is called *Law and Order*. And there is a novel by Claude Simon which begins with this quotation taken from Paul Valéry: "Two dangers threaten the world: order and disorder"—an extremely interesting sentence, because it shows me that these two dangers do not threaten only the novel or the narrative, but threaten the world as a whole.

Causality and chronology are really the same thing in a traditional narrative. The succession of facts, the narrative concatenation, as is said today, is based entirely on a system of causalities: what follows phenomenon A is a phenomenon B, the consequence of the first; thus, the chain of events in the novel. The very order of traditional narration will be causality and temporality as causality. Now if one takes a Nouveau Roman, or New Novel—let us choose a text like *La Jalousie*—what happens is entirely different. Instead of having to deal with a series of scenes

which are connected by causal links, one has the impression that the same scene is constantly repeating itself, but with variations; that is, scene A is not followed by scene B but by scene A', a possible variation of scene A. Nevertheless, these scenes follow each other in an order which should be that of temporality and causality.

Using the terms of Jakobson, a modern critic has said that the contemporary novel, and I think he was talking about *La Jalousie*, arranges metaphors in the order of metonymy—that is, arranges elements which should be interchangeable one with the other in an order, a succession, which should be causal. I understand that the critic would be surprised by that order, but I do not understand why he should complain that it cannot be natural; it is not natural, but it is not unnatural *either*; it is no more or less natural than traditional order. But this new order has the great advantage of calling attention to its own artificiality, of pointing to its mask with its finger, instead of hiding behind the appearance of something natural, in essence, an ideological trap. It is the artifice itself which appears on the scene in the novel. And the great advantage, in my opinion, even the great didactic advantage, of this operation is to place the reader opposite, so to speak, his own liberty. He is not told that the world has been constructed once and for all and that his only duty is to reproduce this world one more time according to the already created forms borrowed from tradition; he is not told, then, that man will never change because he is an eternal and natural animal.

The new narrative mode will place the reader before a kind of emptiness or vacuum, facing the possibility of creating his own order, his own organization, and consequently, facing the possibility of changing the world, only not once and for all. This is something which obviously is rather difficult to explain to the reader who seeks what he regards as "the truth." The concept of truth in fact disappears in this new operation, for that order, as I've said, is a created order. It is not a reproduction of an order which already exists but an order created by the narrative itself. And the order is even, to some extent, created for no reason; once the book is completed one must not think that that particular order will remain as some fine statue of truth which could thereafter be recuperated by disciples who would undertake to create little *Jalousies* in all the centuries which will follow. Absolutely not. On the contrary, once the book is finished, the order which was created by the book, revealing its own artificiality, has disintegrated at the same time, and once the book is finished, the only thing new that remains is each reader's freedom to create for himself a new order, a new order of narration and a new order for the world.

EDITORS' NOTE.—*He spoke without notes, and in translating and editing his talk, we have tried to retain the colloquial force of the original.*

Alain Robbe-Grillet, novelist, essayist, and filmmaker has been the leading exponent of the "New Novel."

Bruce Morrisette is an author of books on Robbe-Grillet and Professor of Romance languages and literatures at the University of Chicago.

SEMIOTICS & FILM: From an Interview with Umberto Eco

William Luhr

Recent film theory has drawn so heavily on semiotics (the study of signs, of signification) that an interview, not with a filmmaker or film theorist about semiotics, but with one of the world's foremost semioticians about film seems particularly valuable now.

Umberto Eco holds a chair in semiotics at the University of Bologna, the first such chair at any university in the world. He edits the journal *VS-Quaderni di studi semiotici*, is Secretary General of the International Association for Semiotic Studies and is on the editorial committee of *Semiotica*. He has written on medieval and contemporary aesthetics, language in art, popular culture, architecture and film. His most recent book, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1976), is generally regarded as a major contribution to the field.

The following interview occurred on November 22, 1976 in New York City.

The issues on which I was most interested in Professor Eco's opinions were: 1) how he felt cinema generated meaning, and 2) where he would situate cinema in reference to specifically cinematic codes.

Umberto Eco:

I would like to be prudent in answering your questions, because you know I dealt with some problems of semiotics of film in 1967 and 1968 and I have not specifically studied these problems since, just because people like Christian Metz, Bettetini, and many others were going on in this line. But in light of my more recent studies, I think that we should reformulate some questions about film. Maybe we (I mean people who have tried to define film semiotically) have been confused by the idea of language. The linguistic model was so overwhelming in the beginning of the semiotic discussion in the 1960's that there was an effort on the part of many scholars to interpret all media of communication in terms of *one* language. I don't think anymore that film is a language; it is a complex of

semiotic phenomena, in which many kinds of codes of disparate languages take part.

I don't think that moviemakers sufficiently consider certain discoveries in cultural anthropology. They should, for example, read Margaret Mead's research on the Samoan islanders, *New Lives for Old*, and see what happened on Manus Island after the arrival of the Americans. How is the typical American movie viewed in another society?

They see it differently because they correlate new meanings. A moviemaker should be more conscious of the fact that he is producing something that will travel around the world and that it will be taken in different ways. There is still a lot of colonialism in moviemaking—as if it were the product of the white man for the white man. It's not so!

William Luhr: Would you speak relative to this of Antonioni's *China*?

UE: Well, we could speak for hours apropos of this point. Let me only summarize it. Antonioni went to China to make a movie with a very sympathetic attitude. I know this because I know Antonioni personally and I know the spirit with which he went to China; I also saw the film before the discussion arose in China and my first impression was of a sympathetic view of China. The Chinese authorities, however, viewed the film as an offense to the Chinese people, as a fascist movie, as an attempt to show China in an unpleasant and nasty light. What happened? After the uproar I had the opportunity to discuss the movie with some Chinese. It happened that some images that, for Western spectators, acquire a positive meaning, for Chinese spectators acquire a negative meaning.

The most typical example is the question of the Nanking Bridge which, according to the Chinese newspaper, was presented by Antonioni as if it were on the verge of collapse. Now, if you look at the sequence of the Nanking Bridge, you will see that Antonioni shoots it in a long travelling shot from a boat which is

passing under the bridge. He is shooting it in an oblique way, transversally—in the same way a normal Western movie would shoot a skyscraper or monument: from beneath, to try to give the impression of majesty and of power; transversally, to give the impression of tension and of a leap towards the sky. But this is a stylistic device typical of the Western movie, and of the late Western movie, and I tried to recall how the Chinese today represent, in their propaganda posters, buildings and various other things. They are very frontal, very symmetrical. Therefore, for them, Antonioni's method of shooting expressed trembling, expressed collapse, expressed an unstable situation or, at least, it was possible to take it in this way.

This means that not only the ideological connotation, but also the direct visual denotation changes according to different codes; they are represented in codes. You have to remember that, if you presented a Renaissance perspective painting to a medieval painter or to a member of another civilization, they wouldn't have recognized the perspectival representation because the perspectival representation is a very artificial one. It presupposes a monocular being looking through the hole in a box. Now, we are eager to accept the Renaissance perspective as the more natural. It is not true at all; it is a convention.

WL: The Chinese see these codes as operating throughout the film?

UE: Yes. For instance, the Chinese were very upset because Antonioni showed sad and old and maybe sick people. He did not feel this was true; he was looking for characteristic Chinese faces. But what is characteristic for us is not characteristic for them. Although Antonioni was democratic and not racist-minded, his way of finding the typical Chinese face was still in some way polluted by a Western way of looking at the Chinese. They didn't recognize themselves; they didn't recognize those faces as typical Chinese faces. And if you look at the new painting in China, they represent a typical Chinese

soldier in a way which is different from the one of antique Chinese painting and which is different from the way in which we show Chinese in a movie or in a painting. So there is another problem, the problem of iconology.

In the same way, in the time of Caravaggio, when he represented the face of the Virgin in *The Death of the Virgin* by painting from reality the face of a drowned woman, the people of the Church and the public rejected this as offensive because, iconologically speaking, they were not accustomed to seeing the Virgin as a normal woman, even though dead; even a dead Virgin should have been different from a normal woman. Caravaggio was offending the public opinion in the same way Antonioni offended the Chinese. So you see it's not necessarily the jump from Europe to China that causes such a difference, it was enough to work in Rome and be a new and provocative painter to create these oppositions and conflicting codes.

WL: What difference in coding do you see between what is generally considered a documentary film as opposed to a fictional film?

UE: We must repropose the difference between sign production and sign interpretation. In producing a documentary you are obviously using a prepared reality which is not prepared in the same way in which you prepare a narrative film. Also, when I see a documentary, I want to be sure that it is pointing toward something existing, while in a narrative film, I am ready to accept that everything has been invented. A documentary can be more ideological, more fake than a narrative film because it cheats the audience, who subconsciously believe they are viewing unretouched reality through a "window." And it's not true.

WL: Which directors, especially European directors, do you find most appealing?

UE: I have been influenced, in my semiotic research, by Antonioni and Godard.

WL: Godard seems to work on a conscious level in his films with the nature of the semiotic process. Do you feel that the films are better as films because of this?

UE: Oh, no. I have been influenced from a theoretical point of view. I don't like the last Godard, I prefer the first ones.

The first time I saw Antonioni's *L'Avventura* I was alone in another city and I left the theatre perplexed, I didn't understand whether or not it was a good movie. Remember, *L'Avventura* has a story which doesn't exist and inessential dialogue; it is difficult. When I returned to my city to work, a colleague asked, "Oh, you've seen *L'Avventura*, how is it?" and I was incapable of giving him a judgement. I tried to tell it to him and I explained *L'Avventura* verbally. I was successful; not only did I give my friend the feeling of this movie but, at that moment, I realized that I loved it myself. For reasons that I am unable to explain even now, a movie without plot, practically without plot, without consistent dialogue, was verbalized, probably because the imagination of Antonioni is also a philosophical imagination. Therefore, the number of images or their relation to the dialogue does not determine the verbalizability of a film.

The other day I saw Jansco's *The Red and the White*; it is a movie which, if you summarize the action, you don't get the effect of the movie. It is produced by facial expressions, slight movements and slight displacements. You can maybe give an impression of this movie more by being an architect and designing a sort of continuous moving plane of the film, a sort of map, than by telling the story. Why? There are other films in which, when you have told the story, you have in some way recuperated three-fourths of the charm and the interest.

That is an interesting field of research. Maybe it would be useful to take people, to make them watch a certain movie and then to ask for resumes and summaries to see what kind of movie they reacted to, and then to

return to the movie to see what was in it to justify these verbal capabilities—the capability to be verbalized or not.

WL: Is this what you refer to as the "open work?"

UE: Well, the open text is the capability of involving the viewer in the production of the text, and dealing in the maximum liberty of producing a text that changes with every interpretation. You can be open at the level of images, at the level of narrative, at the level of ideological response; you can establish the openness at different levels.

I have been very interested in Francisco Halsey, whose films are so politically involved that they don't seem to be open works; they make precise political assertions. But he composes his films in such a way that he offers you the pieces of the puzzle and you are obliged to give a personal answer. He is Brechtian. Apparently the characters of Halsey make political statements; it's very clear and unequivocal what they are saying. It's very clear what they want to demonstrate to you. But, in another way, you have to collaborate to put together all the pieces of the movie. If you remain passive, you cannot really understand what the author wanted to say.

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Commentaries



ALPHA performed

"Week of International Performance"
Museum of Modern Art, Bologna, Italy
Installation photo: Marion Gray

ALPHA performed

(durata: 30 minuti)

Ulteriore intervento sul linguaggio, sulle sue valenze e sulla sua labilità, l'azione-video di D'Agostino si snoda lungo un percorso obbligato in una voluta separazione dei due momenti chiave della *performance*. In un primo tempo, il procedere del pubblico attraverso le sale della galleria completamente al buio nella scia luminosa di sei punti luce creati da grandi diapositive proiettate sui muri bianchi. L'immagine è quella di una freccia luminescente che conduce il pubblico verso il secondo momento dell'azione, mentre la voce dell'artista, amplificata nelle sale, scandisce le parole-guida: *The meaning of words Words disappear, they are condemned there is nothing more to explain.*"

Il secondo tempo è costituito da una installazione-video attorno alla quale è possibile soffermarsi, parlare, discutere contemporaneamente alle immagini che appaiono sul video: parole che si scompongono nei loro frammenti costitutivi, fonemi ridotti alla perdita di significato, insieme di segni grafici che, per un'omissione o un'aggiunta, non hanno più possibilità di comunicare, ricadendo nella primitiva funzione meramente visiva.

L'artista si muove fra il pubblico, pare guidare il percorso nel buio e le parole attorno al video; ma in realtà non vi è nessuno che guidi come non vi è nessuno che parli. Il maggior fascino dell'azione sta nell'atmosfera di sospensione che nell'alternanza di luci e ombre, nel risuonare delle frasi ripetute dall'altoparlante, l'artista è riuscito a comporre per dimostrare esteticamente come le parole spariscano ed ogni potere del linguaggio parlato scompaia quando ci si trova di fronte a possibilità espressive e comunicative ben più coinvolgenti.

Marilena Pasquali

The next exhibit dealing with language, with its value and with its quality, is D'Agostino's video-action. His video-action develops along a fixed course with an intentional separation of the two key parts of the performance. During the first part, the public moves through the totally darkened rooms of the gallery on the luminous path of six light points created by the projection of six large slides on the white walls. The picture is that of a luminescent arrow which leads the public towards the second part of the action, while the artist's voice is amplified throughout the rooms as he "syllabizes" the guide-words: "*The meaning of words Words disappear, they are condemned there is nothing more to explain.*"

The second part consists of the video-installation around which one can pause, talk and debate while pictures simultaneously appear on the video: words which break apart in to their basic fragments; phonemes which are so reduced that they lose their meaning; groups of graphic signs which, either because of an omission or an addition, are no longer able to communicate and thus return to their primitive function of being merely visual.

The artist moves among the crowd. He seems to guide the way in the dark and to guide the words heard around the video-installation; but, in reality, there is no one who guides just as there is no one who speaks. The most fascinating aspect of the action is the atmosphere of suspense the artist creates in his composition of alternating light and shadow and of the phrases repeated over the loudspeaker. By means of this composition the artist managed to demonstrate esthetically how words can disappear and how spoken language can lose all of its power when we find ourselves amidst more expressive, communicative and captivating forces.

Translated by Andria Chiodo



TRANS-EUROP EXPRESSED

San Francisco Art Institute

Installation photo: Deirdre Dowdakin

TRANS-EUROP EXPRESS/EXPRESSED

Trans-Europ Express/Expressed was initiated as an alternative system for presenting the traditional essay. The method follows the theory practiced by Alain Robbe-Grillet:

INFORMATION	SIGNIFICATION
MODIFICATION	REFLECTION
REPETITION	SEQUENCE

PETER D'AGOSTINO	ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET
Time—November 5, 1976 San Francisco, California	Date—November 4-5, 1976 Berkeley, California
Event— <i>Trans-Europ Expressed</i>	Occasion—Lecture and film presentation
Establishment—Robbe-Grillet's film, <i>Trans-Europ Express</i>	Order—Tradition
Invention—Video and photographic dialogue with frames of film	Disorder—Individual creation
Stability—Uninterrupted projection of <i>Trans-Europ Express</i> on large, centrally placed screen at front of performance space	System—Institutionalization of the natural, ordering of sense
Mutability—Two video monitors at 45° angles to centrally placed, large, film screen. Seats for spectators also at 45° angles to large screen	Natural—Trembling of sense, personal artifice
fortuitous scheduling simultaneity discontinuity self-referential repetition visual echoes multiplied surfaces magnified size varying speed time and space extension	
Progression—Prior to performance: <i>Trans-Europ Express</i> through "Athena," analytic projector (normal time sequence of film's 24 frames per second recorded in progressively slowed increments 16, 12, 8, 4, 2, 1 frame per second. Film stopped, images suspended, altered, photographed, reserved in video)	Series—B does not follow A, although it is a consequence of it
Parallelism—Bi-segmented presentation; (a) video record projected on TV monitors, three minutes preceding original film pursuing on large	Repetition—B is rather a modification of scene A

screen; (b) film and video simultaneous with active monitoring. Intermittent reserve images. Staccato simultaneity	
Denotation—Mimetic video creating original context; cutting zooming, locating, measuring, fragmenting, lengthening figures, objects, parts of subtitled text	Signification—Message, direction of senses; established order
Connotation—Objects, figures subtitled text: opacity of old, opalescence of new. Irregularity framed in TV	Information—Relationships, sounds, images, propositions, data, fragments. Confounded phenomenon
Deflection—Film mirrors itself in video. Varying temporal realities of image replication. Unity through repetition, retardation, refraction	Deviation—Words as theoretician contrary to work as creator. Professor, explanations. Creator, divergencies. Information understood, signification
Convergence—Collision of media. Synchronized projection. Structural perpetuation, form alteration. Modified frame. Image duality in filmic/video concurrence	Resolution—It starts just after Sand swept smooth. Footprint. Strong information. Many footprints. Signification. Bicycle tract

empirical esthetic
derivation
synchronic syncopation
isolation

correspondence
successive transformations
rhythmic duration
counterpoint

Text—Subtitles. Lost imagery. Video monitor isolates, enlarges, distorts text. Ceased interaction of image and text. Disorder as reference. Order as object	Word—Diverse meanings. Perception alteration. Randomness
Concept—Word as form	Idea—Attempt sense. Acknowledge it as enemy
Representation—Fixed image in photograph, recalled from "Athena" process. Duration of temporal, filmic time. Eternal present tense. Exhibition	Image—Observer in role of creator
Shadow—Frames of film reconstituted in abstraction	Distortion—New work does not hold itself to be the essence of truth
Vision—Illusory reflection, reposition, recognition	Harmony—Multiple meanings. Artist outside his work
Void—Evanescence	Dissonance—Provocation

proximity
positioning
obscurity
clarity

exterior association
interior evasion
elusive
surface

Kristine Stiles

TRANS-EUROP EXPRESS/EXPRESSED Kristine Stiles

Trans-Europ Expressed, Peter D'Agostino's video, photographic installation begins. The artist projects a pre-recorded tape of Alain Robbe-Grillet's film, *Trans-Europ Express* onto two video monitors placed at 45° to a centrally stationed large, film screen at the front of the performance space. November 5, 1976. 80 Langton Street, San Francisco, California. Chairs for viewing are also placed at 45° to the large screen. They face the monitors. The pre-recorded film continues on the monitors at normal speed of 24 frames per second. Three minutes after the commencement of the video tape, the original film projects upon the large central screen. Product of the old, video leads film in an unsynchronized temporal suspension of self-referential repetition. Inverting time and warping simultaneity, original mimes the imitation. Gradually, the video speed is decreased while the original continues at normal speed.

In preparation, D'Agostino had projected Robbe-Grillet's *Trans-Europ Express* through an Athena, analytic projector, which slows normal time sequence of a film's 24 frames per second to reduced speeds of 16, 12, 8, 6, 4, 2, and 1 frame per second until it is possible to freeze a frame. This motion reduction provides possibilities of producing both temporally suspended images and still ones. During this early taping session, the original film was recorded at various speeds and degrees from full frame to fragmented object. Thus, D'Agostino compiled a bank of reserve images of wide variety of speed and dimension.

The time and motion warp continues to recuperate itself. A series of characters walk down the aisle of the *Trans-Europ Express*. They reflect in the windows of the train and their

shadows fall on the hard metal surface of the corridor wall. The video continues to slow. At the moment of repeated imagery, the video monitors nearly match pace with the film. A succession of images echo between the corridor walls, the glass of the windows, the large screen and the video monitors. A multiplication of identical images reflect figures, objects and surfaces in varying degrees of speed, time and increments of space. Finally the monitors catch and duplicate the filmic speed. Overlap. The first segment ends.

Reflections exist as modifications of originals, consequences of form turned back on itself. Reality is suspended as long as the appearance of the object remains caught between surface and light. When it shifts, surfaces alter, the momentary illusion, a vision, disappears. D'Agostino prolongs, perpetuates and sustains sequences of reflections. These extracted, altered conformations, give substance to the original, fleeting filmic quality. Source remains contextually narrative. Derivative evolves contextually figurative.

Objectified to the point of visual description, the video images confuse Robbe-Grillet's narrative but clarify his images. Objects in unfamiliar context illuminate the irregularity of experience. Deriving definition from position and conjunction, objects yield their familiar plural banalities. Paradoxically, the same dimensions, deprived of location, give rise to new singularity. Isolation in severely reduced reference alters identity. There in the open field, things expose qualities and possible relationships lost in their closed and original context.

Fortuitously, Robbe-Grillet lectures the same evening, November 5, 1976 at the University of

California in Berkeley. He speaks theoretically about the creation of order and disorder in art.

Order is traditional ideology, advancing masked as natural and systematized sense. This institutionalized sense presents itself as Truth. Only when individual creation enters does this Truth, or traditional sense, tremble. Established naturalness is rendered chaotic by the honesty of artifice. At this point, it is possible for the tyranny of Truth to be challenged by the individual. And, here emerges the first possibility for real freedom, a freedom to order the new information received.

Information, or the system of data which locate, measure, limit and define, is signification directing sense and operating on the level of message. Information does not necessarily constitute meaning. According to Robbe-Grillet, when information is strongest, meaning is weakest. Meaning evaporates in a glut of information. As he lectured, Robbe-Grillet codified his ideology. Coinciding in another space, D'Agostino altered Robbe-Grillet's information, disordering meaning and interrupting systematized ideology with newly created form.

The visual tension of the time-warp ends. Staccato film and video imagery syncopate as the pre-recorded, reserve segment gives way to active monitoring of the next reels of *Trans-Europ Express*. Now the texts, objects, figures, abstractions of shadow and light swell on the monitors as moving stills. The active monitoring, zooming, cutting and enlarging invades each frame of film thus extracting and exposing units of information otherwise submerged in the motion and narrative referencing.

During both the intermissions and the changing of the reels, D'Agostino posts photographs, stills taken during the pre-recording session. These images mark segments of a frame's filmic moments and become unique new signs.

An erotic quality in D'Agostino's derivation emerges. A bare shoulder, a hand tied in rope, a suggestive glance and gesture, bare thighs, construct messages of their own. Yet, was the sexuality only due to the artist's reordering, or did he liberate a layer, a code of information locked inside the frame?

The new photographs do not live only as residue of the filmic frame. They operate in the silent, motionless space left after the film ends. They transform becoming autonomous images creating new order. Photographs of isolated,

sub-titled text, individual words estranged from narrative, restricted from grammar become conceptual entities with no clear exterior motivation. Relationships emerge from personal invention. Active participation is necessary to create a new logic from the poetry of D'Agostino's forms.

Three levels of abstracted motion occurred. D'Agostino gradually moved his new forms away from their "natural" positions in motion into his own still artifice. Initially, temporal continuity was interrupted, presenting a staccato film/video experience. Next, extracted, exaggerated images represented out of context, retaining only their relationship to the original appeared in motion on the monitors. Finally, details of the filmic frame hung in a photographic series on the gallery walls. The series became abstracted motion.

Lecture and installation, two structured events raise the question of synchronicity or coincidence. Two distinctly separate realities evolved.

Robbe-Grillet noted that the element which pleased him in his own work was the possibility that further creativity might grow from it and survive in new form.

A translation of Robbe-Grillet's talk in Berkeley was provided for this text by Suzanne Mailloux.

Kristine Stiles is a writer in contemporary art. Her works have appeared in *ARTS*, *LAICA Journal* and other publications.



CHUNG: "Still" Another Meaning
Installation photo: Greg Reeder courtesy
Lawson de Celle Gallery, San Francisco

REVIEW

The fluidity and multiplicity of D'Agostino's offerings characterize the principal concern supporting his art: the investigation of relationships between signs and an exploration of the structural possibilities involved in a given cinematic work.

Each piece explores structure and signification from a different emotional and intellectual plane.

CHUNG is a photographic piece based on interpretations of Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* documentary on the People's Republic of China. *Chung "Still" Another Meaning* incorporates 20 stills from the first four minutes of Antonioni's film as well as quotes by Antonioni and a critic from the *People's Daily*. Although the Chinese invited Antonioni to make *Chung Kuo* for television, they found the final version unacceptable and banned the film. By presenting the film with the criticism of it, D'Agostino gives the original cinematic version a built-in social context. *CHUNG* differs from *ALPHA* not only in its obvious concreteness, but also in its political dialectics. However, while the content or surface structure of *CHUNG* (presented with text) is more obvious than that of *ALPHA*, in *CHUNG* deep structure or language becomes more complex.

The due to *CHUNG'S* structure lies in the complete title, *Chung "Still" Another Meaning*. In this piece D'Agostino begins his investigation of the relationship between the still photograph and the filmic moment. Unlike *ALPHA*, for which stills were shot throughout Godard's film, *CHUNG* is limited to the first four minutes. Therefore, the still photograph breaks the constraint of filmic time. According to Roland Barthes, "The still then is the fragment of a second text whose being never exceeds the fragment."

The stills from *CHUNG* show the edges of the television, bringing the video proscenium into consideration—another structure or layer for the audience to ponder. In *CHUNG* D'Agostino assumes the role of critic or moral arbiter. "I see Antonioni

Hal Fischer

standing there," D'Agostino once said, "and I'm right behind him!"

ALPHA exists as eight 20 x 24-inch photographs. D'Agostino shot 36 exposures during a screening of Godard's *Alphaville*. Appropriately, *Alphaville's* surface or plot dramatizes the loss of linguistic meaning in a future society run by computers. D'Agostino's distillation of the subtitled film contains its original meaning, but adds new elements as well. He constructs his sequences so that they refer to the language of photography (deep structure).

The first four images deal with formal aspects of photography. Light and time are emphasized by the presentation of photographs of illumination or subtitles which discuss time. However, images five through eight refer to Godard's *Alphaville*, a condensation of the film's plot in subtitles and images.

ALPHA is probably the most emotionally involving and easily comprehensible of D'Agostino's works. From a formalist standpoint, it incorporates the most visually appealing images, deep, chiaroscuro-like photographs. Additionally, it is the piece which most closely corresponds to our ideas of what traditional photography should be. Not only in terms of composition and tone does it appear photographically "straight," but also in the manner in which we may read the image. *ALPHA* pays heavy homage to the New Wave filmmakers. As well as utilizing a film created by a New Wave cineaste, it also creates a dialectic between content (the original *Alphaville*) and cinematic/photographic language. This is similar to the dialectics of genre and film language explored by the original New Wave directors.

While *ALPHA* is emotional and poetic, *TRANS* is elusive and sexual. The film *Trans-Europ Express* was written and directed by Alain Robbe-Grillet. Again, the first level of association is homage; Robbe-Grillet's novels and screenplays probe structuralist theory from a literary position.

D'Agostino's *Trans-Europ Express* is the artist's "stepping out" and is a definite move towards humorous ambiguity. The piece incorporates six small strips of three images each and four 11 x 14 photographs. *TRANS* is similar to *ALPHA* in that it consists of readable signs and obvious examples of photographic sequencing. For instance, D'Agostino uses the repetitive imagery of a woman with her hands bound. Sexual images of a woman in bondage are prevalent, and references to death occur in the subtitles. *TRANS* is almost Hitchcockian in its mystery, but unlike *ALPHA* it does not lend itself easily to either interpretation or association. *TRANS* is the mystery, the piece that deliberately does not quite fit into the puzzle.

D'Agostino is capable of working on many visual and intellectual levels simultaneously. *ALPHA-TRANS-CHUNG* can be experienced visually and appreciated without understanding the context from which it is derived. But if one does comprehend the context, D'Agostino's art is filled with homages, humor, and dialectics. The intrinsic beauty of *ALPHA-TRANS-CHUNG* is its unfolding of structure upon structure: the more knowledge with which one approaches this work, the more one finds to understand and appreciate.

Hal Fischer is a photographer and contributor to *Artweek* and *Artforum*.

Exhibitions

La Mamelle Art Center, San Francisco,
October 1976.
ALPHA, "Photography and Language."

80 Langton Street, San Francisco,
November 1976.
Trans-Europ Expressed, film, video,
photography.

Camerawork Gallery, San Francisco,
January 1977
TRANS, "Photoerotica."

San Francisco Art Institute, February 1977
Trans-Europ Expressed, lecture-performance.

Museum of Modern Art, Bologna, Italy;
June 1977
ALPHA performed, "Week of International
Performance."

Kemein Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan;
October 1977
ALPHA, "Recent Bay Area Art."

Cabrillo College Art Gallery, Aptos, California;
November 1977
ALPHA, *TRANS*, *CHUNG*, videotapes and
slide projections.

Lawson de Celle Gallery, San Francisco,
January 1978.
ALPHA, *TRANS*, *CHUNG*, photographs.

Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio;
January 1978.
ALPHA, *TRANS*, *CHUNG*, video projection,
photographs.

New York Avant Garde Festival, Cambridge,
Massachusetts, May 1978.
ALPHA performed, videotape.

Artists Space, New York, N.Y., December 1978.
ALPHA, *TRANS*, *CHUNG*, the book.

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San Francisco Chronicle, November 2, 1976
Pictures and Words, Thomas Albright

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*Syntactics and The Ongoing Work of
Peter D'Agostino*, Rae Blakeney

Seventh Assembling, New York, 1977
Trans-Europ Express/Expressed, Kristine Stiles

Artweek, January 14, 1978 (Vol. 9, No. 2)
Film, Photography and Semiotics, Hal Fischer

Afterimage, Summer 1978
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Unanswered Questions—Six in Ohio,
Robert Pincus-Witten

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¹⁰Peter D'Agostino's photographic analysis of the construction of films in which images by Godard, Robbe-Grillet, and Antonioni are translated from a continuous process to one of discrete units explicate the problems of authorship and the meaning of the external world, insofar as the photographic model is not only theory but a property.

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A Photographic Model: Semiotics, Film, and Interpretation