

AVANT-GARDE CINEMA AND CULTURAL NEGOTIATION:  
DOCUMENTARY EXPRESSION, SURREALISM  
AND COLD WAR POLITICS IN JAMES AGEE AND  
HELEN LEVITT'S *IN THE STREET*



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This paper uses the American experimental film *In the Street* (1953), by James Agee and Helen Levitt, to illustrate the instability of the avant-garde as a formal category and the need to study it through a combination of textual analysis and cultural history. It first discusses the film's reception as a documentary, but problematizes such label, since both Agee and Levitt inflected documentary expression by merging it with a seemingly opposite aesthetic: surrealism. It further demonstrates that this merging aimed at negotiating a middle ground between the doctrinairism of 1930s and the evasiveness of 1940s and 1950 modernist American culture.

AVANT-GARDE CINEMA AND CONTEMPORARY FILM THEORY

Since the early seventies, the avant-garde cinema has fulfilled a central rhetorical function in much of critical film theory, where it has denoted a model of dissident film practice capable of both working within *and* subverting the complicit ideological traits of the cinematic apparatus. This double move has been an important theoretical project in so far as film studies has largely defined itself in this period as a strategy for critically inhabiting the discourse of cinema, that is, for being immersed *in* the cinema's pervasive mythologies without being *of* them at the same time. Such conception of criticism, widely enthroned in Anglo-American academia in feminist, materialist, post-structuralist, or gay/lesbian film scholarship,<sup>1</sup> stemmed from the perception that the cinema was what Louis Althusser influentially called an "ideological state apparatus": an institutional site for the (re)production and circulation of ideology. In Althusser's conception, subjectivity was ideology's main effect. Since the "monadic" subject was the fundamental cell of all social aggregates and the assumed site of knowledge and thought, the naturalization of certain models of subjectivity was the basic fulcrum for the work of ideology. The key task for materialist cultural critique was then the dismantling of dominant subjective formations, an activity Althusser described as the "outlin[ing] of a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (subject-less) discourse on ideology" (173).

Although Althusser himself did not make the connection, it was an easy jump to consider the cinema an important arena for the production and circulation of subjective modes.

<sup>1</sup> These critical discourses have been countered by formalist and historicist discourses advocating the "judgement-free" study of film as formal system or historical institution. Among the most influential proponents of formalism are David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Rick Altman, and Dudley Andrew. For a nearly programmatic definition of the formalist project, see Bordwell (1983; 1988). Among the historicists are Bordwell and Thompson (again), Janet Steiger, Douglas Gomery and Richard Allen. (See Bordwell 1983; Allen and Gomery 1985, 3-25). Their work can be contrasted with the critical film history practiced by Mitchell (1979) and, more recently, Hansen (1991).

Through its formal idiom (consisting in centered framing, maximal intelligibility, and invisible style); clear-cut narrative sequence; its promotion of spectators' identification with individualized characters; and the very physical lay-out of the screening situation, which placed the spectator as a privileged, phenomenological "I" ("eye"), the cinema naturalized a centered, self-present subject (Baudry 1974, 39-47; Baudry 1976, 104-28; Metz 1982, 42-57). The program for the materialist film critic was, by analogy with the critic of ideology, the interruption of ideology's self-perpetuation in existing forms of subjectivity. This program was carried out in two main ways: through the exposure of ideological contents and structures customarily muted in mainstream cinema; and through the exegesis and promotion of the alternative film languages advanced by the avant-garde. This double task, arising from the adoption of Althusserian theory into film studies, was first formulated in France by the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The epoch-making document in this respect was Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism." This essay declared the chief subject of *Cahiers* those films characterized by the avant-garde aspiration of "breaking down traditional ways of depicting reality" (1971, 26) and proposed, besides, that the study of more conventional films should primarily address the way they function as vehicles of ideology. The overall assumption in this piece was that avant-garde filmmaking eschewed ideological complicitness by constantly recreating film language, and thus refusing to endorse and perpetuate prevailing strategies of subjectivization.

The British journal *Screen* quickly adopted Comolli and Narboni's proposals and published work which sought to theorize alternative film as well as the workings of commercial cinema as an ideological apparatus. The journal championed the experimental work of Jean-Luc Godard, Nagisha Oshima, Michael Snow, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, among others.<sup>1</sup> In addition to such direct advocacy of experimental film, critical interventions that had Hollywood as their object were also carried out in the name of an avant-garde agenda. Laura Mulvey, for example, ended "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," her influential discussion of classical film's gender-pleasure economy, by endorsing a "radical" practice that would free the camera "into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment" (1975, 18). Likewise, authors such as Peter Wollen, Colin MacCabe, and Stephen Heath, all important *Screen* writers, argued, in the words of a reviewer of their work, "for a modernist or avant-garde cinema that would fragment identity and identification, decentering the character, the reader, and the author" (Naremore 1989, 20; see also Klinger 1986).

Despite its mobilization as model film practice, the avant-garde cinema remained naively theorized. In *Screen* discourse, for example, avant-garde film obstructed ideological self-perpetuation by plunging into crisis mainstream strategies of representation, and, in the most fortunate examples, by coupling formal experiment to a radical political project (Wollen 1982, 92-104). This definition postulated an unmediated relationship between alternative form and critical effect and essentialized the former as the ground where such effect would emerge. It located meaning in the text, not in the far more complicated

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<sup>1</sup> Other influential film journals of the time followed suit. In the wake of *Screen*, the American publication *Jump Cut* frequently reviewed all kinds of political and experimental film, from Latin-American cinema to structuralist/materialist work to the feminist avant-garde. And *Camera Obscura*, which was started out in the late 1970s, strove in its early issues to furnish criticism of the feminist avant-garde. Its second issue, for example, published articles on Chantal Akkerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, Marguerite Duras's *La Femme du Gange*, and Babette Mangolte's *What Maisie Knew*, together with a dossier titled "Women Working"; other early issues contained material on films by Yvonne Rainer, Valie Export, and Laura Mulvey, or on earlier women filmmakers such as Maya Deren.

interactions between texts and channels of dissemination, audiences, and specific social, cultural, and historical horizons. Being text-centered, this conception of avant-garde cinema forbore examining the way in which meaning is always contested, plural, and unstable--an actualization resulting from the interface of textual production and socio-cultural insertion.<sup>1</sup> If we accept this latter characterization of meaning, however, the avant-garde status of a given work cannot rest exclusively on its textual features and these features' presumed relation to ideology, but also on the dynamics of the work's circulation and social performance. Avant-garde texts are characterized by formal experimentation and cultural dissidence, but these traits must be ascertained from texts' concrete relations to the socio-political moment; to the larger artistic community; and to available cultural horizons and cultural memories. Placed against such a grid of determinants, the characterization of a text as avant-garde will be tactical and tentative, highly contextualized and historically nuanced.

This paper will use the American experimental film *In the Street* (1953) to illustrate the instability of the avant-garde as a merely textual category and the consequent need to establish more flexible parameters of research through a combination of textual analysis and cultural history. We will first discuss this film's initial reception as a documentary, but will problematize such label, since both Agee and Levitt inflected documentary expression by merging it with a seemingly opposite aesthetic: surrealism. We will try to demonstrate that this merging aimed at negotiating a middle ground between the doctrinairism of 1930s and the evasiveness of 1940s and 1950 American modernist culture. Because of this, the film must be understood not just formally, but also contextually, in relation to the cultural politics of the American avant-garde in the pre- and post-war years.

### *IN THE STREET*

The film was scripted by James Agee and photographed by Helen Levitt, who was responsible for its visual style. Both were helped out in the shooting by Janice Loeb, a frequent collaborator in the 1940s and 1950s projects of New York independent filmmakers Sidney Meyers (*The Quiet One*), Morris Engel and Ray Ashley (*Little Fugitive*). According to Jan-Christopher Horak, *In the Street* was shot on and off in 1945 and 1946, but was not released until 1953 (1995 75). The film's sixteen minutes depict spontaneous street scenes shot mostly in Harlem and the Lower East Side. It opens with title cards containing a short preface written by Agee: "The streets of the poor quarters of great cities are, above all, a theater and a battleground. There, unaware and unnoticed, every human being is a poet, a masker, a warrior, and a dancer, and in his innocent artistry he projects, against the turmoil of the street, an image of human existence." The film illustrates this double characterization of the street as stage and battlefield. Most of it records, in candid-camera fashion, the spontaneous role-playing and minute theatricals of daily life. On occasion, theatricality modulates into warfare as the antics of a group of children dressed in improvised Halloween costumes gradually turn into a humorous street fight. Sequences are most often thematically organized, clustering together takes of specific topics: shots of old people talking, hanging out, or walking their dogs are followed by takes of couples, and then by images of children. In addition to combining thematically related shots, the editing sometimes proposes complex graphic continuities and contrasts. Hence at the very opening

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<sup>1</sup> Underlying these statements is work which emphasizes the transactional character of cultural meaning and therefore relativizes the text as the privileged site where signification emerges. The English-speaking cultural studies tradition has been an important source for such research. See, for example, Hall 1979; Morley 1980; Bennett 1983 and 1985; Bennett and Woollacott 1987; Fiske 1991; Radway 1984. On their applications to film, see Dyer 1986; Klinger 1989 and 1994.

of the film, a boy riding a bike moving screen right is juxtaposed to a shot of a girl in a motionless baby buggy, while people behind her move in the same direction as the boy on the bike. And at a later point, a group of girls traverse the frame from right to left, their movement rhyming with that of a stolid matron in the next shot; in turn, the girls' lithe step contrasts with the old woman's lumbering gait. These connections between shots are quite subtle and only emerge after several viewings. On a first screening, the film seems loosely strung together, its lack of structure a counterpart of the teeming life of city streets. The main protagonists throughout are children, Levitt's dominant photographic interest at the time. (Her first important solo exhibit, held at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1943, was "Photographs of Children"). They are seen quarrelling, running, playing with stones, wooden pegs, or derelict toys, or, in a humorous scene, taking each other's place right in front of the camera. In this last fragment, the succession of the children's close-ups provides a series of graphic matches, which are rather surprising in a film more concerned with capturing spontaneous, raw energy than with visual symmetries. In the midst of these thematically linked sequences, there are occasional unrelated shots, like that of a young woman gazing through a window that reflects shadowy buildings and spectral passersby.

The only narrative moment in the film may be the children's street fight, which evokes a relatively coherent chronology and spatiality. But even this action is intercut with others and disseminated throughout the film. The children are first seen idling, playing in groups, and preparing or showing off their Halloween costumes. Some discover a mound of what looks like spilt flour (perhaps very thin sand), and start filling up stockings (or sleeve-like pieces of cloth) with it. Soon afterwards, they are engaged in a fight with their makeshift weaponry. The scenes of the fight are intensely kinetic and lyrical. Swift pans capture in long shot the graceful body English of the kids as they run around, step up to each other to deliver their blows, and quickly withdraw again. Without recognizable battle lines, the brawl seems a free-for-all, with the camera giddily following the chaotic movement that fills up the space in front of it. The lyricism in this section largely stems from the eerie clouds of white dust punctuating the blows, and from the incongruous (we might say surreal) juxtaposition of the dismal environment and the children's creativity and playfulness.

For such effects, this scene is reminiscent of the famous dormitory pillow fight in Jean Vigo's *Zero de conduite* (1932)--which Agee had reviewed for *The Nation*. In this scene, the feathers from a ripped pillow drift in the air while children fight and improvise a procession filmed in slow motion. Like Vigo, Agee and Levitt juxtapose the intoxicating energy of the children to the stiffness of dull, disapproving adults: think, for example, of the shot of a woman chasing some kids away from her stoop; of that a surly middle-aged man apparently scolding one boy; and of the cut-away takes of frowning onlookers and (possibly) mothers trying to recall their charges from the rumble. Yet unlike Vigo, who unambiguously celebrates the children's capers for disrupting the oppressive adult order, we will see that Agee and Levitt attach to their play some destructive overtones.

Due to its matter-of-fact recording of actuality, the film has usually been perceived as a documentary. The scant critical notices it received upon release emphasized its continuity with documentary expression, and later writers and historians have done little to question such label. In his *Theory of Film*, Siegfried Kracauer regards *In the Street* as an example of "imaginative" documentary, which he contrasts with the coolly factual *Housing Problems* (1935), produced by British documentarist John Grierson (Kracauer 1960, 202-03). Two years later, underground filmmaker and critic Jonas Mekas regarded Agee and Levitt's film the starting point for a realistic trend culminating in early 1960s *cinéma vérité*: "The change [towards contemporary avant-garde practice] began with *In the Street*, with James Agee, with Sidney Meyers, with Morris Engel, with Stanley Brakhage. But it had to wait a few

years, until the technology caught up with the temperament of the new man, until the coming of Ricky Leacock, Don Pennebaker, a score of young TV documentarists ... the portable synchronous cameras." (Mekas 1962, 49) Countering these opinions, film historian Jan-Christopher Horak has recently discussed the film as an avant-garde piece which fuses Helen Levitt's authorial interests in children at play and urban life with a taste for the carnivalesque. This characterization is clever and well-argued, yet it somehow flattens out the film's documentary component and, in addition, does not tell us much about what kind of avant-garde we might be referring to, nor about what the label *avant-garde* means in the film's specific cultural context. And while *In the Street* does indeed have both avant-garde and documentary traits, its cultural inheritance is far more complex than suggested singly by either of these two labels. Our aim in the following pages will be to unravel it in some detail, as it will give us the keys to the film's "cultural performance" as an avant-garde work.

Agee's and Levitt's artistic curricula granted the reception of their movie as documentary. By the time the film was in the making, Agee was a fairly well-known writer in New York intellectual circles and a popular film reviewer for *Time* and *The Nation*. During the thirties, he had been on the payroll at Henry Luce's *Fortune*, for which he wrote journalistic pieces on such varied topics as glass manufacturing, life on the open road, the drought in the midwest, trains, cockfighting, and illuminated manuscripts. His most ambitious pieces of work by then were a documentary book with photographs by Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), and an autobiographical novel, *The Morning Watch* (1951). Helen Levitt, for her part, was a New York-based photographer specialized in urban topics. She had worked as an assistant to Walker Evans in the mid thirties and had later been involved in some productions by the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs and by the Office of War Information (Phillips and Hambourg 1991, 45-56).

Both Agee and Levitt were inheritors of 1930s documentary expression, a trend which influenced movies, high and low literature, journalism in all media (including the recent radio boom), painting, sociology, and even dance. For William Stott, a historian of the period, documentary reflected "the consummate need of the thirties' imagination," which was "to get the texture of reality, of America; to feel it and make it felt" (1986, 128). Many of the decade's observers and protagonists had previously expressed this idea. Summarizing the cultural developments of the period, William Phillips wrote that 1930s fiction (and artistic production in general) "tried to become continuous with common experience" (1962, 212). For his part, Philip Rahv, Phillips's fellow editor at *Partisan Review*, stated that "social questions drew the literary imagination closer to social reality" (1939, 7-8). And Alfred Kazin concluded that young writers at the time wanted to "move into literature" the life found in "the streets, the stockyards, the hiring halls" (1936, 15). As many such testimonies confirm, the main motivation for the documentary impulse was the Depression. The unprecedented state of crisis brought about by it compelled many to dig into the country's social makeup and structures. This initiative ensued from the notion that if society were better known, its problems might be more easily dealt with (Stott 1986, 69-73).

The documentary impulse was institutionally promoted by the New Deal government and by the Socialist and Communist left. Both made the reporting of "the way things were" an important tool of their respective political programs (reform, in the case of the New Deal, revolution in that of the far-leaning left). For the Roosevelt administration, documentary expression served the function of fostering cultural nationalism. Like the regionalism promoted by the government-sponsored Federal Art Projects, documentary expression produced images of the country which were easily identifiable and in telligible;

which celebrated everyday aspects of American culture; and which were thus conducive to a climate of national unity favorable to New Deal measures (Doss 1993, 135-37). For revolutionaries, documentaries bore witness to the injustices of laissez-faire capitalism, a system that the recent Depression had proven bankrupt. At the same time, for its accessibility, attention to quotidian detail, and polemical edge, documentary was an important "agit-prop" tool, close enough in aim and form to the engaged social realism launched in the early 1930s by the Second Congress of Revolutionary Writers celebrated in the Soviet Union under the aegis of the Soviet Communist Party (Aron 1961, 237-68; Gilbert 1992, 88-117).

Immersed in this cultural climate, both Agee and Levitt took for granted the social responsibility of the cultural producer, a belief that made them enlist their efforts in giving testimony of injustice. From early on in her career, Levitt avoided aestheticism and practiced testimonial photography; in turn, Agee progressively turned away from poetry to documentary essay--Agee's essays, however, are often enough shot through with lyricism and subjectivism. In their commitment to recording inequality and social conflict, both Levitt and Agee chronicled the plight of the least favored sectors of society: Agee devoted several years of his life to endlessly revising his unclassifiable report on poor Southern tenant farmers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; and, in addition to children, Levitt photographed the homeless, slum-dwellers, and unemployed. In these respects, they were responsive to the tenor of American intellectual life at the time. The America that contemporary painters, photographers, filmmakers, commentators, reporters, and writers sought to document was that populated by the unprivileged: "the worker, the poor, the jobless, the ethnic minorities, the farmer, the sharecropper, the Negro, the immigrant, the Indian, the oppressed, and the outlaw" (Stott 1973, 53). As dwellers of poor urban neighborhoods, the protagonists of *In the Street* are a likely addition to the list. Hence, although the film was produced in the early fifties, its topic and feel of recorded actuality stem directly from the 1930s documentary.

At the same time, though, it is important to point out that if Agee and Levitt's film is deeply indebted to 1930s documentary expression, it is also quite different from it. For one, thirties documentaries were quite directive in form and intent, leading the spectator to foreordained conclusions and messages.<sup>1</sup> The mid- and late-thirties films of New York collectives Workers' Film and Photo League (*Bonus March*, *Hunger March of 1932*, *Scottsboro Demonstration*) and Frontier Films (*Heart of Spain*, *China Strikes Back*, or *Return to Life*, for example) present unambiguously stated theses. This was done partly through forceful visuals, partly through the use of extremely (almost ridiculously, by present standards) self-assertive voice-over commentary--which came to be dubbed at the time "voice of God." So important was this device that for many contemporary critics, the spoken text and the visuals of such films as Pare Lorentz's popular documentary *The River* (1937)--in many ways a trend-making film--were equally important and actually interchangeable (Barnouw 1993, 120; Stott 1986, 212).

By contrast, *In the Street* seems extremely non-directing. It forgoes the "voice of God," giving spectators for all lead a rather poetic thesis at the outset. Moreover, editing patterns are pretty open and vague; as we have mentioned above, they do not build up coherent space or time coordinates nor univocal conceptual relations. The action and the characters' identities are equally unspecified. Where does the film take place? Who are the people

<sup>1</sup> Bordwell and Thompson call these documentaries "rhetorical formal systems" (1990, 99-105). For Bill Nichols, they were "didactic," the voice-over working as a self-legitimizing, unquestioned master-discourse (1983, 250-60). See also Campbell (1985) and Alexander (1981). For more recent theorizations of the documentary see Nichols (1991) and the essays in Renov (1993).

presented? What are their names? What do they do? Why are they there? These questions were always clearly answered in 1930s documentary film and writing; *answering* them, finding out common people's particulars, was indeed the main goal of this genre. Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, still a very atypical sample of documentary, was centered on three families about whose circumstances we come to find out in nearly excruciating detail. However, we are spared all such information in *In the Street*.

Such elision has the effect of making characters and actions in the film at once near and distant: near because their presence is immediate and physical, unmediated through knowledge of their social and personal circumstance; and distant because, without such knowledge, they remain somewhat remote, obscurely perceived, as if in a dream. Because of this double telescoping, characters are for the most part irreducible to anything but their screen presences, their physiques and kinetics. The film thus eschews the stereo typing and sentimentalizing typical of much 1930s documentary work, where characters are viewed in terms of wider social groups, as stand-ins for "the suffering proletariat," "the toiling farmer," "the downfallen middle-classes," and so forth. At the same time, the lack of typology or narrative results in a certain thickening of the physicality and materiality of "characters" and background. Unhinged from wider signifying schemes, both people and their milieu appear objectified, inert, a swelling of the real impervious to interpretation.

Inertness is visible in the vacant air of the film's subjects, emphasized by the inclusion of seemingly meaningless (because decontextualized) gestures, and of "dead" time in shots of people waiting, looking through windows, leaning against door frames, or sitting on the stoops. Vacantness accentuates idiosyncracies of body and behavior. While the film does show sympathy for those it portrays, it does not (unlike most 1930s documentaries) edit out the ugly or quirky in them. Part of the quirky emerges as unmotivated aggressiveness, which sometimes crops up in relation to the camera. Some people scowl or react hostilely to its presence. An old woman yells at the operator (one can read her lips): "Stop that thing." Even the children, affective center of the film, are occasionally aggressive and cruel, albeit playfully so. This ambivalence towards children is characteristic of Helen Levitt's work, where they combine unstoppable creativity and energy with an impending sense of danger. One of her trade-mark photographic motifs shows kids climbing up facades, perched on window sills, or dangling from eaves in all sorts of impossible balances accentuated by slightly off-center framing. In these pictures, the children infuse the humdrum urban landscape with a certain enchantment, even while they court danger. The environment also participates of a certain inertness and strangeness. The city appears shadowy, squalid, and vaguely threatening, and hence close to the inner city of contemporary film noir, pulp fiction (by Cornel Woolrich or Mickey Spillane), or "hard boiled" photography (by Weegee, William Klein, or Robert Frank).

These features give the film a slightly hallucinatory air, which does not come from manipulating the light or lenses, or from framing it through a subjective consciousness, as it was common in the avant-garde films of the period. The film's oddness stems in stead from the disconnected quality of its subjects; from their obtrusive materiality; and from a certain unruly quality in the objectual world. One can read under the film's sympathy, lyricism, and social awareness of injustice, a muted fascination with the bizarre and irreducibly idiosyncratic in faces, attitudes, and urban squalor, and in the fantastic juxtaposition of creative play (the masks and Halloween costumes, the physical excitement of the fight) and dreary background. Paradoxically, these surpluses of actuality make *In the Street* "too real" for the heavily typologized kind of reality conveyed by documentary conventions. A full account of the film must take these marks of excess into account somehow. To do so, we will read them against their historical and cultural context, which is not the real, but the surreal.

## SURREALISM AND THE AUTOMATISM OF THE OBJECT

It may seem paradoxical that the attempt to portray the real overshoots its mark and delivers instead the surreal. In any case, the imbrication of surreality in the concrete, factual world marks an important surrealist concern. In the foundational manifesto of the movement, Breton defined surrealism as synonymous with “psychic automatism in its pure state.” Automatism denoted the emergence of “certain forms of previously neglected associations” produced “in the absence of any control exercised by reason” (1968, 26). These associations were celebrated for their potential to “derange the senses,” “bewilder sensation,” (1968, 263) or “reveal marvelous in everyday life” (1968, 275). Although Breton didn’t put it quite so starkly, one can glean from the manifesto two main modalities of automatism: subjective and objective. The former stemmed from the free-associative thought processes unhinged within the individual consciousness. Its main (and often banal) application was in *écriture automatique*--writing carried out with total spontaneity, without filtering or censoring any association that might come into the writer’s mind. Objective automatism designated the disconcerting, incongruous qualities occasionally arising from single or haphazardly juxtaposed items. Some of these items were “things extravagant ... the modern *mannequin*, or any other symbol capable of affecting the human sensibility for a period of time” (1968, 16). And as if to further illustrate this point, a few years after the first manifesto, Breton’s novel *Nadja* devoted long sections to the exploration of the fantastic, often disturbing, intimations accruing on advertising billboards (“the luminous Mazda sign on the boulevards”), shop signs, facades, film serials, *bad* plays, or “old-fashioned, broken, useless, incomprehensible, even perverse” objects encountered in flea markets (1960, 52, 129). Detached from habit, utility, and rationality, these bizarre objects were celebrated for their “potential to disorient” and for their ability to objectify unconscious desires, fears, or impulses.

More than in Breton’s work, however, the objectual world’s surreal potential was thoroughly treated in the late 1920s writings of Salvador Dalí. He regarded the objectual realm as the plane on which “delicate and constant osmoses take place between reality and surreality. This reality of the objectual world becomes more and more submissive, docile, and faded in order to obey the violent reality of our spirit” (128). [“Osmoses délicates et constants ... s’établissent entre surrealité et réalité. Cette réalité du monde objectif qui se fait chaque fois plus soumise, plus docile, et plus estompée, pour mieux abéir à la réalité violente de notre esprit”]. Consequent with this view, Dalí proposed the documentary as the most amenable genre to carry out the surrealist exploration of the object. This genre, he defended, was akin to surrealism; it was anti-literary and anti-aesthetic, and it explored “the objectual world” (“le monde objectif”) automatically--without exerting conscious control over it. Because of these qualities, documentary was able to deliver what Dalí regarded as the fundamental goal of surrealism: *lyricism*--“one of the most violent aspirations of humanity” (125-26). Automatism, lyricism, the eruption of the marvelous in the midst of the everyday spring, for Dalí, not only from subjective states like dreams or hallucinations but also from the intense communion with the objectual world: “Lyricism is born out of the closeness to reality; and we know thanks to [philosopher Henri] Bergson that reality can only be approached through instinct and the most irrational faculties of our spirit” (125). [“Lyricisme naît de l’approche de la réalité; et nous savons, par [Henri] Bergson, qu’il nous est possible de l’approcher seulement par l’instinct et nécessairement par les facultés les plus irrationnelles de notre esprit”]. Examples of Dalí’s surreal documentaries are several sketches of Paris written for the Catalan paper *La Publicitat*. In them he purposefully avoided picturesqueness and local color to devote his undivided attention to the litter in streets and gardens, trivial details of weather or fashion, the music heard at neighborhood



cafes and bistros, or to the improvised choreography of hands, glasses, cigarette butts, and wildly assorted items converging on the tables at outdoor cafes:

At the *Perroquet* [a side-walk cafe] I take note of everything I see on the tables. On one there are three whiskeys, two small bottles of sparkling water, a small finger, an ice-cube melting on the table cloth; on another one, a straw; on another a packet of cigarettes, a glass of champagne with pieces of fruit, three hands, two fingers (as I take note, a hand and a finger disappear simultaneously), a gold bracelet (131).

[A *Perroquet* je prends note de toutes les choses qui se trouvent sur les tables. Sur l'une d'elles il y a trois whiskies, deux petites bouteilles de soda, un petit doigt, un glaçon en train de fondre sur la nappe, sur une autre une paille. Sur une autre, une boîte de cigarettes, une coupe de champagne avec des fruits, trois mains, deux doigts (au moment de prendre note, une main et un doigt disparaissent simultanément), un briquet en or.]

The surreality of these descriptions emanates from a paradoxical double perception analogous to that described in *In the Street*: objects are at once immediate, intensely real, and infinitely remote, disembodied, disconnected.

It is important to note that in the canonical histories of surrealism (Nadeau; Jean; Matthews; Balakian; Fowlie) automatism at large is made to mean subjective automatism (more specifically, automatic writing), while objective automatism is cursorily discussed, if at all. And yet it is in objective automatism where surrealism acquires an epistemological dimension as a strategy for the exploration of physical reality. It is here also where one of the main aims of surrealist philosophy is achieved--the dissolution of polarities: "Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions" (Breton 1968, 123). Object automatism brings forth one such sublation between objective and subjective, material and spiritual, as the material embodies the psychic and the psychic becomes tangible.<sup>1</sup>

These ideas held a great fascination for Agee and Levitt. Agee, for example, delved into the relationship between the real and the surreal in his short essay "Art for What's Sake?" published in the December 1936 issue of the left-wing review *New Masses*. Under the editorship of Granville Hicks and Mike Gold, this magazine was at the time the main proponent of orthodox Marxist views on arts and politics--hence an influential advocate of social realism and documentarism and of the critical-revolutionary projects attached to them. Agee's article is an audacious attempt to reconcile Marxist commitment with surrealism, which was at the time rabidly rejected in orthodox left-wing circles as self-indulgent, vacuous, and politically ineffectual.<sup>2</sup> Agee defended that modern art must

<sup>1</sup> Although Dalí was its most articulate defender, a surrealist theory of the object was also pursued in surrealist film criticism (by Luis Buñuel, Jacques Vache, and Breton, among others); in the frequent photo-essays of *La Révolution surréaliste* (think of Brassai's pictures of "sculptures in volontaires"); in Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades; and in the construction of "surrealist objects" (Breton 1968, 255-78; Dalí 1971, 177-82). Objective automatism has further ramifications in surrealist culture. It underlies the fascination with nature and natural science on the part of Buñuel, expert entomologist; Max Ernst, who called his sketches of textures (*frottages*) *Histoire naturelle*; and Jean Painlevé, author of surrealist-scientific films. Moreover, the research on the object is also at the center of the surrealist interest in ethnology and non-Western art, interests amply cultivated in the pages of Georges Bataille's journal *Documents*.

<sup>2</sup> In the increasingly polarized atmosphere of the late 1930s, Agee's thesis stands as a third way between artistic autonomy and submission to the demands of a social project--embodied in the

combine the social awareness of Marxism with the truths of the unconscious as explored by the surrealists. Either of these two trends in isolation might result in impersonal doctrinairism or in elitist withdrawal into the self; in combination, they could foster social consciousness while showing at the same time how reality both moved and revealed the deepest recesses of the mind (Agee 1936, 48, 50). Furthermore, in the opinion of one of Agee's biographers, this aesthetic proposal promised to synthesize his previous dedication to lyrical poetry with his current one to documentary prose (Bergreen 1984, 180).

"Art for What's Sake?" sketches out the rationale for the outlandish *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and, more distantly, for *In the Street*. In both pieces social awareness was channeled through documentary expression, and the rendering of the real was brought into the orbit of the surreal by a certain "automatism" of objects, faces, and gestures. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, as much as the farmers themselves, their material world was Agee's and Walker Evans's keen concern, to the extent that Agee claimed that their book should really consist of an assortment of artifacts from the farmers' environment: "fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement" (62). In the attempt to reproduce the sharecroppers' material environment as closely as possible, he didn't stop short of describing the grain of the wood in the walls of their houses, the mold and rust in tools and household implements, the texture of dust growing in the corners, the stains on the floor boards, or the junk piles in the back yards. Yet the closer he observed the real, the more it acquired a certain latency of its own, which made it lean toward the surreal. On a night table he found "A heavy moist brown Bible, its leaves almost weak as snow, whose cold, obscene, and inexplicable fragrance I found in my first night in this house" (161). And, in one of many (Dalí-like) inventories of the farmers' belongings he listed: "an old black, comb, smelling of fungus and dead rubber, nearly all the teeth gone. A white clamshell with brown dust in the bottom and a small white button on it. A small pincushion made of pink imitation silk with the bodiced torso of a henna-wigged china doll sprouting from it, her face and one hand broken off" (161). On other occasions, the physiques of the farmers appeared pregnant with unsettling intimations, as was the case with Bud Woods's "dimly criminal" countenance (79).

Agee discovered a peculiar beauty in the farmers and in their randomly assembled and poorly produced objects. Their rough houses reminded him of the austere Doric architecture, or elsewhere, of a "fugue of Bach": "The square home, as it stands in unshadowed earth between the winding years of heaven, is *not to me but of itself*, one among the serene and final, uncapturable beauties of existence" (134). And in another passage, he minutely dissected "three qualities of beauty" in the grain of the wood: "One is the steaming killed strength of the grain, infinite, talented, and unrepeatable from inch to inch, the florid genius of nature which is incapable of error: one is the close-set transverse arcs, dozens to the foot, which are the shadows of the savage breathings and eatings of the circular saw ...: one is the tone and quality the weather has given it, which is related one way to the bone,

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Communist Party and, after 1936, in the anti-fascist Popular Front. The tension between these two alternatives structures similar proposals like Breton's "Second Surrealist Manifesto" and the statements that Breton's surrealist group issued through the 1930s. In these, surrealists often sought to synthesize their ideas with Trotskyism, a synthesis that would maintain their artistic independence while harnessing their artistic project to revolutionary politics. In the contemporary American scene, the most influential attempt to merge radical politics and radical modernism was carried out by William Phillips, Philip Rhav, and Dwight Macdonald, editors of *Partisan Review*. These various attempts succumbed to the strenuous demands of the extraordinarily charged political moment and, by the early 1940s, were quickly leaning towards an apolitical brand of modernism. (Lewis 1988; Aaron 1961; Gilbert 1992; Guilbaut 1983; Wald 1987).

another to satin, another to unpolished but smooth silver ..." (94). The beauty of these items and materials came from their bare functionalism and from the tragic quality communicated to them by the environment of suffering and destitution where they were made or used: "It seems to me necessary to insist that [their] beauty ..., inextricably shaped as it is in an economic and human abomination, is at least as important a part of the fact as the abomination itself" (203). And elsewhere: "The partition wall of the Gudgers' front bedroom is importantly, among other things, a great tragic poem" (204). Hence what most seemed to attract Agee in this "aesthetics of poverty" was the symbolic power or savage lyricism of objects, qualities which reflected (in his own phrase) "the cruel radiance of what is."

Agee's reverent attention to the folk, amateur, and homegrown was part of a contemporary trend multiply overdetermined by political, cultural, and social developments. Among these, we can mention the boom of American anthropology, impelled since the 1910s by Franz Boas's and Ruth Benedict's studies on Native American art and culture and later on by Edward Sapir's writings on comparative linguistics. Also influential were the New Deal's federal programs for documenting American art and folklore. These resulted in enormous amounts of recordings, song transcriptions, and oral histories, together with such collective works as the American Guide series of the Federal Writers Project, and the WPA Index of American Design, a collection of over 10,000 paintings and illustrations recording the decorative arts in America. Interest in local American cultures was intensified through the 1940s by the sense of exclusivism and cultural nationalism encouraged first by the war effort, then by post-WWII international hegemony. And more important for our purposes was the influence of the European avant-garde, particularly of surrealism's fascination with amateur (also called primitive) and non-Western art and design. Sidney Janis, New York-based art dealer, imported this sort of appreciation into the art scene of the 1930s and 1940s through several exhibitions of American amateur art. The companion volume to these exhibits, *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century*, was advertised with an endorsement by André Breton. To further emphasize the continuity between amateur art and surrealism, Janis's subsequent book, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, repackaged some primitives (Morris Hirschfeld was one of them) as fully-fledged surrealists (Janis 1942 and 1944).

Another forum where these ideas were consistently examined was the American magazine *View*. Published between 1940 and 1947, *View* was the brainchild of Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler. Ford was mainly a poet and editor; Parker a film critic, poet, and essayist. Together, they had written in the early thirties *The Young and Evil* (1933), a novel that mixed modernist experimentalism and the camp idiom of gay street culture. Interested in propagating and practicing French surrealism, *View* profited from the influx into New York of European talent fleeing the war in Europe. As a result, such artists as Eduard Roditi, Man Ray, Kurt Seligman, Andre Masson, Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington, Marcel Duchamp, or Roberto Matta Echaurren, all residing in New York at some point during the 1940s, occasionally collaborated with the journal.

Besides European surrealism, the editors of *View* were interested in the spontaneous surrealism growing untutored in amateur art; folk architecture and design; and art by children, prison inmates, and the insane. In addition, *View* writers caught glimpses of the surreal in such popular arts as sports (in the persona of Senegalese boxer Saki and the body language of judo); jazz, written up by Barry Ulanov; and Hollywood films, reviewed by Parker Tyler. These types of art were abundantly represented in special issues devoted to Americana Fantastica, the American Macabre, and Tropical Americana. They were valued for their symbolic charge, their "potential to disorient" (Breton's phrase), or their ability to materialize psychic impulses, fears, and desires. In addition, *View* writers were often

attuned to the dissident potential dormant in these art forms. Hence avoiding the patriotic overtones of some contemporary celebrations of Americana, Parker Tyler's introduction to the Americana Fantastica issue of *View* declared the folk-fantastic "the inalienable property of the untutored, the oppressed, the insane, the anarchic ... It is definable as the imagination of the underprivileged aware of a fresh and overpowering strength." This characterization echoes Agee's descriptions of the sharecroppers' material culture; however, among the examples of this aesthetic Tyler gives is not Agee's work but the "the photographs of Harlem children by Helen Levitt." (1943, 5)

A picture of Levitt printed in this issue, placed within a multiple-page assemblage by American artist Joseph Cornell, foreshadows some of the themes and aesthetics of *In the Street*. Its title is "Knight in Harlem" and shows a boy with his face covered drawing a toy sword in a gesture at once wary and threatening. The photo is an emblematic sample of Levitt's already mentioned penchant for underlining the disturbing, even sinister traits in the world of childhood. Its inclusion in this issue of *View* reinforces the surrealist filiation of Agee and Levitt's film. As we have tried to show, this filiation explains the film's (so far undetected and unaccounted for) fascination with the bizarre as well as its connection with Agee and Levitt's previous work and with wider contemporary cultural trends.

### IN COLD WAR AMERICA

The mixture of surrealism and documentary in Agee and Levitt's film clearly signals its detachment from dominant 1950s culture. At the time, documentary form was redolent of two displaced political programs: the Popular Front and the New Deal. Popular Front ideology had informed the documentaries produced by collectives Film and Photo League and Frontier Films--both animated by eminently leftist programs--and even by federal agencies of the Roosevelt administration (such as the Tennessee Valley Authority or the Farm Security Administration.) In a period characterized politically by the cold war abroad and by red-baiting and witch-hunts at home, the pro-Soviet stand of the Front and of its cultural manifestations (including the socially-committed documentary) was particularly incriminating. 1953, the year *In the Street* premiered, saw the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg accused of pro-Soviet espionage. It was also the year of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, a somber metaphor of a society racked by the climate of suspicion and fear prompted by the Cold War. On the other hand, the documentaries ties with the New Deal were far less provocative; they evoked a past politics focused on internal reform and national survival, and therefore quite removed from the dominant issues of the day.

Initially defined by the Truman administration, post-war politics showed an internationalist outlook, as they were intent on maintaining American international hegemony and containing the Soviet menace. (Truman 1969, 411-16) Continuing the work of the previous administration, both the Truman and Eisenhower governments made some progress in civil rights legislation, and expanded existing social programs, but they also buttressed the corporate liberalism that had emerged in the last years of the New Deal. The dominant political ideas of the time were articulated in an influential book, *The Vital Center* (1949), by historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Schlesinger's thesis was that the 20th century experience of crisis, totalitarianism, and war had shown that right and left political programs were equally bankrupt. Only the liberal "vital center" could regenerate and preserve a free society. Liberalism was based, for him, on the "unconditional rejection of totalitarianism and a reassertion of the ultimate integrity of the individual" (38). In order to defend these principles, liberals had to concentrate on "the maintenance of individual liberties" and "the democratic control of economic life--and to brook no compromise, at home or abroad, on either of these two central tenets" (56).

If the collectivist concerns of the New Deal dovetailed with the aims and practices of documentary expression, liberal individualism echoed in the subjectivism emblematic of post-war intellectual life. Political engagement and responsiveness to reality among 1930s cultural producers gradually gave way, in the 1940s and 1950s, to the artist's detachment from the social environment. In the words of critic William Phillips, the artist was someone "at war with the existing gods and disposed to nurse his disaffection and sense of alienation--a zealot, we might say, of the advance guard" (1944, 121). The same year, Lionel Trilling confirmed Phillips' observation when he diagnosed that "there exists a great gulf between our educated class and the best of our literature" (1979, 89). While the gap between the artist and the public was frequently bemoaned, it was also regarded as a source of creativity and critical independence. Alienation contained an element of protest, as it signalled estrangement from a world dominated culturally by mediocrity and commodification, and politically by an unhealthy polarization between totalitarianism, on the one hand, and conformist liberalism, on the other. Alienation translated in many cases into the artist's withdrawal into subjectivity and psychology as only realms of transcendence. Expressionist painter Adolph Gottlieb put it as follows in a characteristic statement: "Today, when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality" (1947, 42). The contemporary avant-garde cinema was also under the swing of these ideas, as it produced film after film dwelling largely on visions, dreams, and memories. In them, the psyche, not the external world, was the realm of transcendence and truth.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, a film like *In the Street*, which was in many ways a documentary on the everyday life of the deprived and under-represented, tried to recuperate for experimental cinema the social responsiveness and engagement of an earlier decade. Yet engagement was filtered here through an aesthetic, not a political, program: that of surrealism. In this fashion, Agee and Levitt detached themselves from the directive, manipulative character of the typical 1930s documentaries, a manipulateness that often obeyed the demand that art should be subjected to specific political agendas. Their film can be read as a further stage in the polemic that confronted, through much of the 1930s, proponents of social realism and of formalist modernism. For the former, the social use of art resided in its propagating revolutionary ideas; for the latter, autonomous formal experimentation was the most revolutionary program of all. If (broadly speaking) in the 1930s the balance was tipped toward social realism, in the 1940s and 1950s it leaned towards formalism. Intended as a synthesis between both approaches, *In the Street* fell into the gap between them, where it remained only visible as a documentary, invisible in its provocative attempt to fuse social engagement with the surrealist exploration and debunking of what is.

#### CONCLUSION: WHAT AVANT-GARDE?

While on the basis of its formal features alone, *In the Street* could be regarded (as indeed it was) a documentary, the historical and contextual mediation of its form yields a more complex picture of the film as an avant-garde text. As such, it was involved in a multi-leveled negotiation of dissidence against the cultural politics of documentary, surrealism,

<sup>1</sup> Highly representative in this respect are Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) and *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), Curtis Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* (1946), Gregory Markopoulos's *Psyche* (1949) and *The Iliac Passion* (1951), Willard Maas's *Image in the Snow* (1948), Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), Sidney Peterson's *The Cage* (1947) and *The Lead Shoes* (1949), among many others (Singer 69-99; Adams Sitney passim).

and postwar modernism. The presence in the film of this plurality of discourses uncovers the heteroglossia (Mikhail Bakhtin's term) characteristic of all cultural production (Bakhtin 1981, 259-75). This heteroglossia--this plurality of voices, perspectives, discourses, and styles--should warn us against conceptualizing the avant-garde as a homogeneous front. As we have seen in the preceding pages, the avant-garde defines itself not only against a so-called "mainstream" but also, and equally importantly, against other fronts of dissent. In view of this, the notion of a more or less unified avant-garde should perhaps be replaced by a multiplicity of coexisting, interlocking, and often opposed avant-gardes.

Heteroglossia also forces us to question the *avant* in avant-garde. As critics have often noted (Calinescu 1987, 95-97; Huyssen 1986, 3-15; Enszemberger 1974, 27-31; Wollen 1993, 205-10) this term is a product of the intellectual climate of the early decades of this century, when the modern movement saw itself as the culmination of a long trajectory in Western culture. Within existing cultural hierarchies, it saw itself as the critical foil to a compliant rear-guard, which, in different times and contexts, included nineteenth-century academicism, regionalism, kitsch, and folk art. As we have shown with regard to *In the Street*, however, the avant-garde has often drawn its critical momentum from commonplace objects and environments, and from amateur, mass, and popular art. Such symbiosis between "high" and "low," or between "avant" and "rear," questions the validity of such polarities and implicitly advocates a theorization of avant-gardism in terms of circulation, of the tactile activation of subversion. Avant-gardism is then a centerless process of reading, encoding, bricolaging difference from available materials. Rather than a formally definable aesthetic, it is a constant process of departure and escape, a Balkan region of culture whose borderlines are constantly being redrawn.

Consequent with this landscape of recurrent difference, decentered activation, and radical hybridity, one wonders if the criticism on the avant-garde should concern itself with further distilling what we mean by the term.<sup>1</sup> Tentatively, we will propose that it should not; that there is another profitable task for criticism. This task consists not in fixing and realizing its object, but in de-realizing it. We do this by tracing its hybrid inheritance and its contextual connections to that limit where its contours dissolve and its cultural identity takes flight.

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<sup>1</sup> This has been the goal of extremely important work on the avant-garde. As an example: Matei Calinescu's *The Five Faces of Modernity* has as its epigraph the following words from T.S. Eliot's "Experiment in Criticism" (1920): "In literary criticism we are constantly using terms which we cannot define, and defining other things by them. We are constantly using terms which have an intension and an extension which do not quite fit: theoretically they ought to fit; but if they cannot, then some other way must be found of dealing with them, so that we may know at every moment what we mean" (1987).

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