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Robert Smithson; *Spiral Jetty*; 1970.

REPETITION AND THE SITE OF THE REEL

BY DOT TUER

An examination of a film by Jim Anderson: *Bois de Balzac*; 16mm, black and white/colour, sound, 1973-81; Distributed by the Funnel and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre.

There are four legends concerning Prometheus: According to the first, he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed...

In the opening sequence of *Bois de Balzac*, what appears to the viewer as an aerial pan of a distant earth sharpens into focus and reveals a close-up of the gnarled bark of a tree trunk. The camera movement, in turn, is revealed as a spiral action which encircles the tree, moving outwards from the trunk, upwards through the branches, towards an empty sky.

According to a second, Prometheus, goaded by the pain of tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it...

The implications of this opening sequence can be read as metaphysical. The tree functions as a symbol of a Lost Paradise; the camera's path represents the order of a renaissance universe; there is a phenomenological merger of the filmmaker and nature, of the spectator and space.

According to the third, his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, the gods forgotten, he himself forgotten...

Yet this moment of philosophical cognition is as quickly ruptured for the viewer as it is fleetingly grasped. A voice-over displaces the metaphysical signification, intoning "once upon a time... Belgrade 1950". This specificity is in turn re-placed by the naming of other cities, other dates. Disparate sounds, narrative fragments, voices of people, descriptions of objects that never appear, in turn disrupt the mapping. Our attention is directed to the immediacy of the image "... see the squirrels sitting on the branch"; misdirected by their absence from the visual frame of the film.

According to the fourth, everyone grew weary of the affair. The

gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily...

For, while the camera's enclosure of a visual image through a continuous spiralling and encircling motion defines the sculptural and representational properties of a particular tree in Queen's Park, Toronto, the soundtrack interrupts its structural and 'material' presence. Enveloped by whisps of voices, sounds, music, and names, the visual rhythms of the camera become caught, contained. The eyes can shut but not the ears. And so narrative becomes the interloper, disturbing modern space and dispersing temporal purity with fragmentary recollections of the subject's desire to layer meaning upon vision.

But there remained the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it came out of a substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable.¹

In her book, "Passages in Modern Sculpture," Rosiland Krauss begins the modern with Rodin and ends the modern with Robert Smithson. She traces its origins in the transformation of meaning in sculpture from a classical economy of an internal narrative to a surface abstraction in Rodin's *Gates of Hell*. She locates its conclusions in a movement from a "static, idealized medium to a temporal, material one"² that culminates in Smithson's monumental wharf of earth: the *Spiral Jetty*. And it is within the parameters of Smithson's work that Krauss finds an immediacy which has eschewed narrative; experiences a "moment-to-moment passage through space and time"³ that supplants historical formulas. Yet I imagine Krauss' position to be exactly that of an historical formula. For it is a temporal moment in criticism. It is a moment severed from her own investment in an artistic model which enables her to embrace minimalism and abstraction as a radical break with the past. She constructs a paradigm that disposes of the signified in favour of the primary signifier: the material presence of the art object. But she constructs this paradigm upon a chain of historical and philosophical signifieds; a 'progression' of sculptural moments which interlock location, production, and context to frame objects as art. And by designating the contemporary significance of sculpture as traces of the body's 'presence' upon the surface of the medium, she evades the issue of social space. For in both the public monument of the



Auguste Rodin; *Balzac*: 1897.

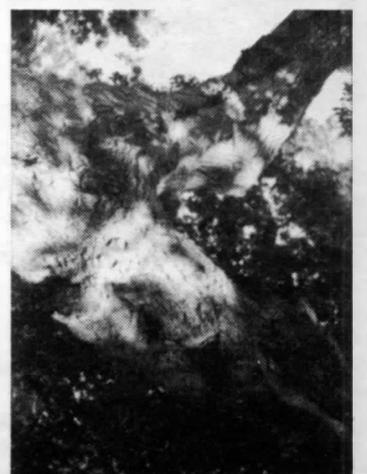
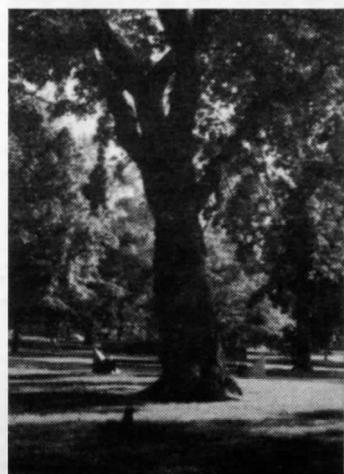
renaissance and the site-specific earthwork of contemporary America, formal strategies are inextricably intertwined with political narratives.

The renaissance statue or fresco informed its viewers of a symbolic structure that embraced a city-politic and a state-sanctioned religion; a structure Krauss designates as the internal narrative. The modern earthwork, on the other hand, framed by Krauss in relation to its external abstraction, assumes a space within her criticism that deflects narratives while at the same time it reflects them. For the site-specific sculpture is not an object unto itself and nature, but a contextual operation. It exists within a culture that promotes image over substance; that veils ideological alignments through a call for individualism; that disguises a goldrush formalism by championing pluralism. And so I distrust, not the *Spiral Jetty*, but Smithson's insistence that "no ideas, no concepts, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that phenomenological evidence."⁴ For I also imagine, in a moment of immediacy removed from the discourse of Krauss' model, the reaction of a traveller who happens upon this inexplicable mass of earth. I suspect that this traveller would desire to affix a narrative, a legend, or a fiction to this evidence in order to locate him/herself in a relation of

meaning to this object. A mystic might overlay a myth of creation upon this spiralling mass. A tourist might wonder when the new McDonald's was going to be built. An historian could derive a cultural metaphor for America's manifest destiny and its frontier imperative to dig raw monuments from the earth. A scientist would search for its practical relation to air and water currents. A cynic might wonder why anyone bothered. But to experience the spectating activity of this object as a radical de-centering in and of itself, one must pre-suppose the idealization of the centered being. Krauss' imaginary viewer must exist as a Cartesian subject, a 'modern' individual for whom perception is unmediated by their social construction within a symbolic discourse; for whom the history of American art has become everyman's language for 'seeing' objects as art. And it is these assumptions which Anderson questions in his film *Bois de Balzac*.

If it had been possible to build the tower of Babel without ascending it, the work would have been permitted.⁵

Like Smithson, Anderson is the producer of a spatial configuration that spirals between earth and sky. Yet his encirclement of a tree for forty-two minutes inverts the 'material' encounter of the earthwork. For the



disjunctions/conjunctions of the soundtrack and the incessant camera movements are concerned with mapping the subject's relationship to language, not objects. He seeks to question the 'presence' of a centre, to undermine the idea of perception as an immediate and unmediated 'seeing.' Instead, the film constructs a social space; an arena of discourse where an attempt to understand why we desire an immediacy, a presence, is made. For, in *Bois de Balzac*, it is absence, or rather, the impossibility of presence, which positions the subject. The tree functions not as a primary signifier, but as a continuously mediated object; as an object of repetition which splits rather than de-centers the spectator. In this way Anderson's film concerns itself with the psychoanalytical 'real' of the unconscious rather than the construction of a verifiable reality. This is a 'real' which is hidden, which is disguised in our conscious state as a constitutive presence, and which is ultimately unknowable. As such, Anderson's cinematic mechanisms operate as a parallel for a system of representation that sustains our access to a symbolic structure and maintains our function within it. The circular movement of the camera becomes an extension of the child's 'fort-da' play, a game Freud identified as pivotal to our entrance into a social and translatable space. In the game, the child threw a spool or reel of thread across the room whenever his mother left him. Flinging it away from him, he would say 'there', pulling it towards him, he would announce 'here'. The reel became a representation for what was missing (his mother), and a concealment of a primary separation; of the first moment of absence. And so Anderson's centrifugal tracing of a tree becomes an action which seeks presence by revealing absence. It documents, not our encounter with the 'real', but our missed encounter which forces us to substitute representations, to construct narratives, in order to conceal the profound anxiety of this first separation.

I am frightened and astonished to see myself here rather than there, for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then.⁶

The orbiting motion of Anderson's camera, which at first closely circles the tree, expands in diameter until its varying speeds and movements resemble the paths of planets in an immense and complex solar system. The image of the tree, while remaining the physical centre of the frame, becomes lost in the foliage and surroundings of the park. The camera inadvertently documents a boisterous parade which marches upon the road that encircles the woods. This is the only visible crowd scene in the film; a group of middle-aged Shriners dressed up as Indians. Anonymous voices, however, interject other contexts before and after the frame is emptied of the parade. "A crowd of students is passing, they shout football cheers", on a summer day. In the early morning, we hear a whistle, we "see the large crowd of people marching through the trees. Some are holding signs. There is a large effigy of a head. It is now burning. People are shouting 'We will be free. We will be free. We will be free' ". At another moment it is night. The spiral web of the camera intersperses closeups of the trunk with the slippery zigzag of a slip moon and the dotted lights of downtown buildings. Throughout the film a voice repeats an encounter we never see; an encounter where a woman standing by the tree is approached by a man and they go off together. This repetition, intertwined with glimpses of people, fragments of stories and events, conversations between friends, populates an imaginary history of the tree. But,

despite the density of social interaction created by the soundtrack, a sense of emotional dislocation grows as the camera moves relentlessly further from the tree. Suddenly, private whispers of voices compound feeling of anxiety. Snippets of their words, "Help me, . . . help me . . . bags and bags of dirt, many, many bags of earth", evoke an atmosphere of suffocation for the listener. No longer able to locate a visible 'presence' in the tree, the viewer struggles to comprehend the inaudible gist of murmurs. And it is only in those moments when the camera returns to a recognizable outline of its form that this sense of dislocation subsides.

Why do we lament over the fall of man? We were not driven from Paradise because of it, but because of the Tree of Life, that we might not eat.⁷

Paradoxically, it is not the material process of the camera's motion, the continuous spirals, that facilitates this feeling of anxiety. Rather it is the inaccessibility of the tree which provokes what appears to be a spatial disorientation. The camera itself never deviates from a rigid structure that is at all times signifying the tree as the centre of the frame. A narrative surrounds the tree with observations, imagined and actual events. Yet neither the visual or audio exploration is durational in its investigation of the object. The camera never comes to rest upon the tree. The soundtrack infuses perceptual space with contradiction. And it is these subtle interrelationships of the film that creates a spectating activity where the viewer is inscribed into a pattern of repetition that demands the memory of a form while constantly eluding it. This is not the repetition of a structuralist premise which seeks visual purity, but the repetition of the analysand. It engages the subject in a search for the absent moment which constitutes his/her presence in a symbolically structured realm of language and social space. Thus although the film returns again and again to a particular object, the tree never 'looks' the same. Its permutations are as endless as the spirals and sounds which engulf it. It constructs a situational repetition, an overlay of spatial and discursive moments that entice the viewer to seek a consistency of re-collection, but, by its very mechanism, demands the new. For if it were possible, as Krauss suggests, to know the object in a moment of immediacy, the subject would have returned to the moment of splitting; a moment before language and after birth where social space does not exist. And to return to this moment, to position oneself at the site of the 'real', is to enter a space which we call madness. Thus it is the power of Anderson's film to reveal 'presence' as a play of signifiers, as a system of representations which locate points of recognition in order to divest the subject of a primary anxiety. For it is at those moments in the film where the tree is most obscured that the viewer senses the radical significance of absence framing presence.

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony.⁸

Stephen Heath proposes in "Questions of Cinema" that "structuralist/materialist film has no place for the look. Ceaselessly displaced, outphased, a problem of seeing; it is anti-voyeuristic."⁹ But despite the seemingly laudable characteristic of this cinematic genre, Heath finds this intention problematic. For in the structuralist/materialist project to



employ repetition as a framing device to locate the subject outside of the economy of narrative, he suggests that this premise becomes a defined and limited project with its own confirmed audience—and its own cultural trap.” This charge of a closed system, of a moribund modernism, is what Anderson is addressing by re-framing repetition as a problem of language in *Bois de Balzac*. When he began the film in 1973 earthworks and durational cinema were in their heyday of cultural validation. Michael Snow’s *La Région Centrale* (1971) was critically embraced as the final word in a revolution of cinematic perception. For it was in this film that the viewer became divested of all relation to a social construction of ‘seeing’. Instead, he/she became the absolute centre of vision, the literal eye of a mechanical apparatus which was programmed to move the camera in all directions around an empty landscape in northern Quebec for three hours. A soundtrack synchronized and composed from the original sound of the camera device punctuated the spatial fragmentation of the viewer’s vision. But, by fusing the viewer and the camera motion as an undivided presence in nature, any social or political significance of our of our position in the world became nullified. The problematic of ‘seeing’ became reduced to a formalist strategy, to a philosophically determined investigation of spatial purity. As such, the radical properties of the film were the subject of an internal discourse, an artistic model which demanded a continuous and rigorous displacement of the subject’s investment in the construction of narrative. *La Région Centrale* became the pinnacle of a modernist revolution in the art object; a revolution which divorced aesthetics from politics; a revolution which cornered the viewer in a formal space emptied of all symbolic significance.

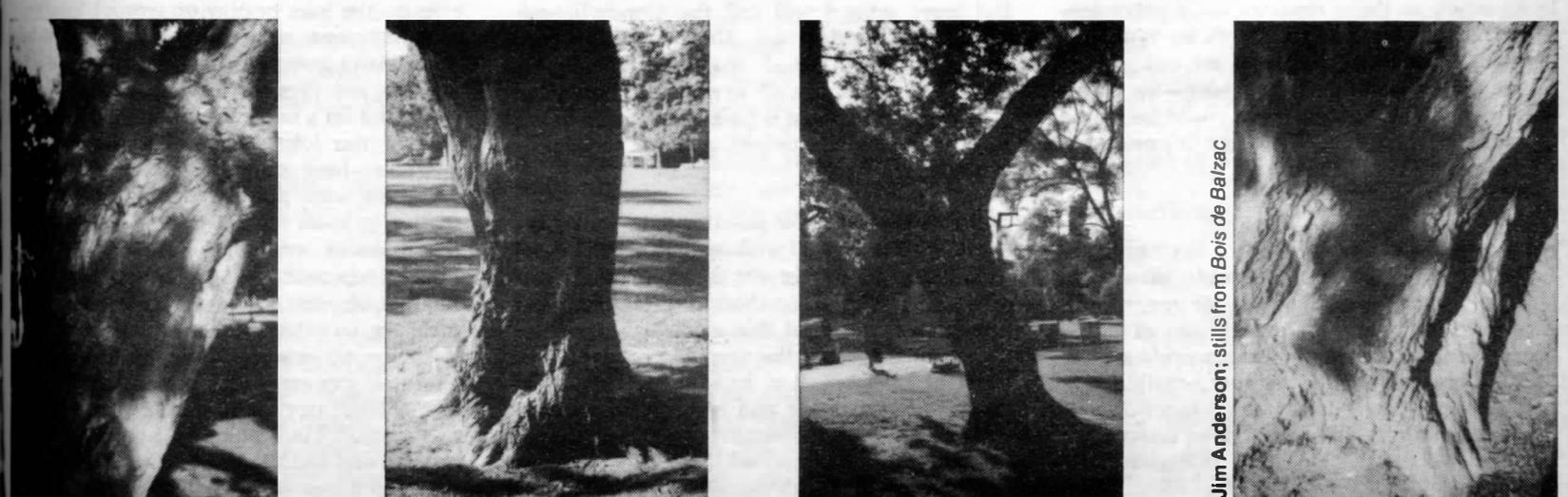
As for the significance which repetition has in a given case, much can be said without incurring the charge of repetition.¹⁰

Anderson’s film, on the other hand, explores the conjunction of formal and social constructions of space. In *Bois de Balzac* there is a ‘place’ for the look, for our desire to fix meaning upon objects in order to constitute a presence in the world. However, this desire for a purity of vision is revealed as a structure which functions to conceal the primary site of the look; the site of the impossible ‘real’; the sight of our unconscious realm. As such, the viewer experiences a situation of psycho-analytical transference in Anderson’s film. It is as if he/she is the analyst; the film the analysand. The spiral camerawork, and the soundtrack with its diffuse snatches of memory, its brief dialogues between absent figures who de-populate the frame, its odd noises, its sudden spurts of sound, function as a representation of our desire to reach the presence of the ‘real’ by concealing its significance. And like the analyst, the viewer becomes the site of hearing, listening carefully for the convoluted repetitions in a narrative that seeks to uncover the true, hence unknowable, center of the tree. Thus the location of meaning in the film is a desire to affix an illusive center to an activity of ‘seeing’ while revealing the anxiety this desire produces, and it is a function of Anderson’s inscription of himself as a subject of this process. Unlike Snow’s film, where the camera is a mechanistic device coolly surveying a separate landscape, Anderson’s camera is hand-held, voluntary in its path. As he returned with this apparatus of documentation over and over again to film the same tree in Queen’s Park, his investigation became less and less the ‘objective’ of a cinematic process, and more and more the subject of a personal

homage. It is not the camera which functions as a ritual of repetition, but the filmmaker himself. His investment in the tree, his circular motions, become manifestations of his own desire to uncover the meaning behind the formalist strategies of the 1970’s. And by layering imaginary and symbolic fragments of narrative upon his own insistence to repeat an investigation of a singular image, he suggests to the viewer the radical diversity which the modernist project held captive through its own insistence upon the ‘material’ presence of the art object.

In this way, Anderson’s tree functions in defiance of Krauss’s modernist chronology. For it becomes at the same moment a continually transfigured and static idea. At one instant it resembles Rodin’s sculpture of Balzac. In another instant the chiseled torso and face of a woman protrudes mysteriously from the trunk. An old woman stands below the branches of the tree, infusing the image with the fleeting powers of an oracle. She calls herself the “Venus of the rags”, fallen to a state of sin “loneliness and fright in a strange world.” A hunter “who long ago walked in a forest that once stood here” haunts the frame with his absence. An invisible couple is forever meeting at the center of the camera’s path: the tree. Thus, far from emptying the object of investigation of all internal narrative, Anderson’s film infuses the image with a myriad of ghosts and figures, metaphysics and imagination. But in so doing, he subverts their historical function as representations that allow the viewer to affix a determined meaning upon the object. Rather these fragmentary and elusive events allow the viewer to conceptually halt the fluctuating motion of the camera, but only for a moment. And, in their momentary intersection with the spatial demands of the film’s visual structure, they serve to underline their significance as constructions of meanings which encircle a primary trauma of separation. Thus *Bois de Balzac*’s interspersion of structural and narrative mechanisms creates a spectating activity which opens and closes the gaps between what is knowable and unknowable as a subject; between an illusion of unity and presence and a split at the site of the real which conceals absence. As such, the tree becomes not an object, but an object of discourse. *Bois de Balzac* becomes a film about mapping the inscriptions of meaning which construct the subject as a mediated presence in the world. And so Anderson’s seemingly simple image of a tree becomes, through his film, at once a shrine, a statue, a symbol, a fiction. But it is never an object which claims for itself access to the ‘real’. It is never an object framed by a phenomenology of pure ‘seeing’. Instead, it becomes an object of investigation which proposes to examine the context for modernism’s insistence upon the virtue of an unmediated vision. ■

1. Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), page 83.
2. Rosiland Krauss, *Passage in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983), page 282.
3. *Ibid*, page 282.
4. *Ibid*, page 282.
5. *Parables and Paradoxes*, page 35.
6. Blaise Pascal, *Selections From The Thoughts* (Illinois: AHM Publishing Corporation, 1965), page 10.
7. *Parables and Paradoxes*, page 29.
8. *Ibid*, p. 93.
9. Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), page 171.
10. Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton University Press, 1964), page 136.



Jim Anderson; stills from *Bois de Balzac*