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“Modes of Distinction: Home and Avant Garde Modalities”¹

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“Art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (Pierre Bourdieu)².

The denigration by many important media critics of the home mode’s cultural functions often arises in part from their theorizing the mode of amateur practice as a genre rather than as an economic relation. That is, while the category of "amateur" should be properly conceived of as an umbrella term describing any non-industrial media practice independent of the market or free of commercial exchange value, too often it is mistaken as a set of textual signifiers, techniques, and socio-political ideologies negating those of the industrial system. This approach tends both to essentialize and to politicize amateurism by equating its practices and texts with the avant garde.

Consequently, critical approaches to amateur practice will be inflected by a priori concepts--for if the avant garde becomes the defining essence of amateurism by dint of its resistance to all things industrial, any amateur practice that overlaps with industrial techniques, properties, goals, or ideologies may be deemed corrupted or deformed. Here we see how the misunderstanding of amateurism leads to its misuse: a descriptive, economic category slips into prescriptive aesthetic and ideological judgment, and holds all practices within the amateur field accountable to the avant garde. The home mode, therefore, as a practice that generally fails to interrogate dominant ideology in any explicit manner, may be condemned according to this logic as a betrayal of amateur strategies of resistance.

As the relation between the amateur and the industrial fluctuates continuously over time, any critical approach based upon identifying essentially amateur technologies, techniques, and aesthetics will be subject to ahistorical taxonomies. For example, although Hi-8 video may initially have been designed for and used primarily by amateurs, increasingly it was adopted by professional journalists; although jump cuts may have appeared experimental in the 1960s, they have become a staple of television advertising and music videos; and although formal self-reflexivity at one time may have

¹ Text slightly adapted by the author from his book *There’s No Place Like Home Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 64-79.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) 7.

foregrounded a self-conscious awareness of the means of production, it has become popularized as a commercial form of hipster irony.

Refining Amateurism: economic relations and functional modalities

Fundamentally an economic relation, "amateurism" accommodates any non-industrial practice pursued for reasons other than market exchange. It is the presence of commodification that properly defines the industrial, and inversely, the absence of commodification that defines the amateur--rather than the historical contingencies of their respective technologies, aesthetics, or ideologies. Thus, as a non-commodified practice, the home mode properly falls into the field of the amateur, and its cultural functions should be studied as relatively autonomous.

Granting relative autonomy to the home mode complicates, revises, or outright rejects arguments that amateur practice should be "rightfully" avant garde in nature. For example, media progressives generally define "proper" amateur media artifacts as autotelic: anti-utilitarian, removed from exchange relations, and opposed to standards. Although home mode artifacts fail to meet these criteria--utilitarian in their use for ritual functions, embedded in relations of gift exchange, and measured by standards of realism--home mode practice is, nevertheless, exercised in and for itself, autotelic according to a different set of pleasures.

To restore amateurism as an economic relation and its various fields of practice as relatively autonomous, we must distinguish two analytical categories: "genre" and "mode." Whereas genre taxonomies generally identify differences among artifacts according to repeated patterns of internal textual signifiers (icons, thematic conflicts, narrative cues), modal taxonomies identify differences among practices according to repeated patterns of external cultural functions. Let us take documentary as one example to illustrate the difference. Although documentary is commonly classified as a genre in video rental stores, film guides, and college course syllabi, what common icons, themes, and cues do all documentaries share that would establish them as a coherent genre? Perhaps if we focus upon one period or producer of documentary, such as Grierson's work in the thirties, we might be able to list a catalog of shared elements: black-and-white footage, advocacy of social reform, sober narrative voice-over. Already, however, we can predict that, by the time we arrive at the work of Chris Marker, this catalog will be revealed as ahistorical and obsolete: a residual definition failing to apprehend emerging documentary forms and content.

If instead of genre, however, we conceive of documentary as a mode (or modes) of practice, we may discover common underlying cultural functions that most, if not all, documentary artifacts in some form or another may fulfill, independent of the medium in which they are produced, the aesthetic of their techniques, or the substantive content of their subject matter. That is, rather than attend to the internal aspects of a documentary's signifiers, we turn to the external intentions of its practitioners in order to construct a taxonomy of documentary practice. Michael Renov offers an excellent

illustration of the benefits of this type of functional modality, outlining four of documentary's primary cultural functions as 1) to record, reveal, and preserve; 2) to persuade and promote; 3) to analyze or interrogate; and 4) to express.³ Stated in an infinitive form, these functions serve at once as nouns and verbs, signifiers of documentary as both artifact and intention, as a product of technology, aesthetics, and agency. Renov's functional modalities serve to widen the field of documentary practice to include a greater range of texts no longer limited by the rigid either/or binaries between nonfiction/fiction that would uphold, say, a Fred Wiseman at the expense of an Errol Morris.

In the same manner, by establishing a functional modality of amateur practices, we may widen the rigid either/or binaries that frequently uphold the avant garde at the expense of the home mode. We must keep in mind, of course, that taxonomies based on functional modalities of practice do not produce uniform taxonomies of media texts themselves: several modes may operate within a single text. Yet unlike a hybrid genre, in which elements may mix, we would never speak of hybrid modes; instead, modalities tend to alternate within a text, each serving the cultural function for the moment it is intended. For example, returning briefly to documentary, Vivian Sobchack notes that the killing of a real rabbit in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939) ruptures the film's symbolic representations with an extra-cinematic indexical referent; in other words, a documentary modal moment representing an actual death is embedded within a fictional narrative, which gains power from that moment's "ferocious reality."⁴

As Sobchack's example illustrates, the point of functional taxonomy is not to construct arguments about purity (something to the effect that Renoir compromises fiction with an excess of realism), but to locate and understand the diversity of intentions criss-crossing through texts and among fields of practice, to sort out their fuzzy resemblances in order to appreciate distinctions of both/and rather than either/or. We might say that any media text is structured-in-dominance by several modalities in a mixed economy: while the mode of classical cinematic fictional narrative may dominate Renoir's film, the documentary mode's relative autonomy shifts the balance during the scene of the rabbit hunt to evoke the set of connotations we have come to associate with documentary's intention toward authenticity.

Returning to amateur practice, by adopting this dialogic notion of modality, we might better appreciate the interplay of conservative home mode moments in the work of Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage, whose films are generally structured-in-dominance by the avant garde, without feeling obligated to conclude that their work is compromised or that home mode practitioners should try to emulate their avant garde pursuits. As Steve Neale has argued in his study of genre, "it becomes important, indeed

³ Michael Renov, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary," *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993) 22-35.

⁴ Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9.4 (1984): 293.

essential, to differentiate between the various modalities of pressure involved, and to relate them to the various modalities of the political, ideological and economic conditions in which they function and take effect."⁵

This necessity for modal taxonomies is, therefore, one of pluralization rather than polarization--a method to analyze the differential effects that competing cultural functions may precipitate within a media text and to prevent holding that text accountable to a single or "pure" intention. Discussing the symbolic strategies of signifying practices, Sol Worth has argued that we should not look for meaning within the sign itself, but in its social context, whose conventions dictate strategies of production and interpretation: "It is our knowledge of the conventions which govern social behavior in general, and communicative behavior in particular, that allows us to determine the intentionality of behavior, and hence the nature and extent of accountability that may be appropriate in a specific situation."⁶ Worth denies that intention can be located as a empirical datum, but posits instead that it can be derived first, from the assumptions that any symbolic sign-event has been structured intentionally for the purpose of implying meaning; and second, that its messages are probably intended for those who share its codes.

When informed by Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Worth's discussion of a sign-event's process of meaning attribution and interpretation assists our understanding of the symbolic strategies of the home mode. Unlike critics who advocate an amateur practice defined by phenomena worthy of investigation, Bourdieu contends that the field of photographic practice, in particular that subordinated to domestic functions, is not defined in relation to the object or subject photographed.⁷ Dedicated not to the act of photography itself, home mode participants use cameras to acknowledge, communicate, and reconfirm the set of dispositions, codes, and conventions common to their habitus. Therefore, rather than deem the home mode practitioner's ignorance of a camera's complex functions and eager adoption of automated technologies as indicators of discursive conditioning by manufacturers, Bourdieu asserts that "it is the photographic intention itself which, by remaining subordinate to traditional functions, excludes the very idea of fully exploiting all the camera's possibilities, and which defines its own limits within the field of technical possibilities."⁸

By acknowledging different sets of intentions within the field of amateur practice, Bourdieu's notion of photographic intentionality understands how avant garde and home modes express different cultural functions depending upon the practitioner's symbolic purpose at the time of image making. If our habitus is structured-in-dominance by the home mode, we may tend to produce family representations. Or like Mekas, if our habitus is structured-in-dominance by the avant garde, we may tend to

⁵ Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: BFI, 1987) 10.

⁶ Worth 138.

⁷ Bourdieu, *Photography* 38-39.

⁸ Bourdieu, *Photography* 33.

produce alternative representations by exploiting complex techniques. But as illustrated by *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), a film in which Mekas attempts to construct a family within the New York avant garde art community, affiliations with more than one habitus may overlap. After all, even the most conventional home videographer may experiment with an odd angle or unusual sound effect on occasion.

Functional vectors and fuzzy resemblances

We might distinguish avant garde and home mode intentionality by two sets of functional vectors: conservative/radical and aesthetic/social. The **conservative vector** functions as a mode of "articulation," which cognitive psychologist Arthur Applebee describes as practices that seek to preserve and legitimate a set of beliefs so that they may be passed on intact to a new generation. The **radical vector** functions as a mode of "reformulation," which Applebee describes as practices that challenge a system of values, seeking to extend its range or alter its basic principles.⁹ Although the conservative and radical often align with right and left political agendas, we should not theorize articulation and reformulation according to this one-to-one correspondence. Instead, articulation is better thought of as conservation, and reformulation as transformation. Therefore, within any community, the conservative vector wishes to preserve any set of values seeking continuity over time and space between generations, and the radical vector seeks to overturn any doctrines or dogmas operating as an oppressive set of ideologies within a community. This flexible system of relatively autonomous vectors prevents essentializing subjectivity according to the trends of political correctness, at the same time it allows for ideological critique of reactionary practice. Indeed, both vectors may intersect within a single sign-event: a videotape celebrating three generations of the Women's Movement is, for example, an articulation of the reformulation of patriarchal values.

The **aesthetic vector** functions within media artifacts that foreground form. Practitioners intending the aesthetic vector generally think of themselves as artists, and their products as works of art. The **social vector** functions within media artifacts that foreground content. Practitioners intending the social vector generally think of themselves as makers of documentaries and their products as communication. Once again, these vectors may intersect across a single text, which will usually be structured-in-dominance by one or the other. Thus, while Brakhage predominantly intends the aesthetic vector in *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) and Grierson the social vector in *Night Mail* (1936), Mekas alternates vectors in *Lost, Lost, Lost*, both documenting the avant garde's community and demonstrating its visual codes.

As the example of Mekas illustrates, these functional vectors may intersect and share fuzzy resemblances within a particular media text. Alternately, by heuristically

⁹ Arthur Applebee, *The Child's Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 20-24.

conceiving these vectors as a functional taxonomy, we may locate and understand their distinctive social intentions that may not be readily apparent simply by reading off their textual signifiers alone. Thus, within the field of amateur practice, we can broadly situate the avant garde mode as structured-in-dominance by the intersection of the aesthetic and social vectors with the radical vector, and the home mode as structured-in-dominance by the intersection of the social and conservative vectors, without reducing one as essentially progressive and the other essentially reactionary, but attending to the specificities of their functional values from text to text.

Within the avant garde, we can distinguish two sub-modes. As the effect of the intersection of aesthetic and radical vectors, avant garde formalism foregrounds gestures of rebellion against prevailing aesthetic conventions. Inventing shock tactics, methods of defamiliarization, and new audio-visual codes of perception, this sub-mode of the avant garde, represented by artists such as Nam June Paik, demystifies dominant media practices by foregrounding their materials and processes of production. As an effect of the intersection of social and radical vectors, avant garde activism foregrounds gestures of rebellion against prevailing social conventions. Documenting oppressive living and working conditions, presenting arguments and demands, and stimulating action, this sub-mode of the avant garde, (formerly) represented by activists such as Michael Shamberg, demystifies dominant media practices by foregrounding alternative and self-determined representations of cultural and political identity, including race, class, and gender.

The home mode and functional modality

Neither radical nor naive, the home mode displays a referential aesthetic that rejects photography as a disinterested practice and autonomous art. Defined in terms of use and users, this aesthetic is based on the subordination of form to function, of signifier to signified. Deeming images lacking a referent outside themselves as meaningless, home mode practitioners appreciate artifacts based on informative, tangible, and moral interest, judging their success according to whether they fulfill the intentions of participating members, from which home mode artifacts derive their purpose: "The feature common to all the popular arts is their subordination of artistic activity to socially regulated functions while the elaboration of 'pure' forms, generally considered the most noble, presupposes the disappearance of all functional characteristics and reference to practical or ethical goals."¹⁰

Rather than deriding the home mode for lacking an aesthetic in contrast to avant garde formalism, we should see how it subordinates an expressive function to a referential function. In his important work on the home mode, Jean-Pierre Meunier has

¹⁰ Bourdieu, *Photography* 8.

elaborated this referential function by outlining its phenomenology of spectatorship.¹¹ Discussing the *film-souvenir*, or home movie, Meunier distinguishes its mode of reception from other modes, such as fiction or documentary, by locating identification not with a mimetic image, but with the absent person or event it signifies. Home movie representations, he argues, are taken up as evocations of things specifically known to the invested spectator, whose existence refers to a time and place beyond the confines of the screen itself. In this sense, a home movie's diegesis sutures on- and off-screen space with the shared life-worlds of its participants.

Providing a sociological context for Meunier's phenomenological description, Pierre Bourdieu explains the home mode's referential function as an effect of the economic and cultural capital constituting the totality of its practitioner's habitus. He argues that financial and educational resources play equal parts in shaping one's tendency toward the home or avant garde modes of practice: "The propensity to move towards the economically most risky positions, and above all the capacity to persist in them (a condition for all avant garde undertakings which precede the demands of the market), even when they secure no short-term economic profit, seem to depend to a large extent on possession of substantial economic and social capital."¹² Bourdieu claims that any work of art has meaning and interest only for those who possess an understanding of its codes. The codes most meaningful to home mode practitioners are those that value content more than form and that uphold the presentation of subjects before the lens as more important than symbolic manipulations by the photographer behind it. These fundamental functional intentions distinguish the home mode's general governing aesthetic.

Avant Garde and Home Mode Autonomy: problems of accountability

By distinguishing avant garde and home mode intentionality by variations in social function, material resources, cultural competence, and phenomenology of spectatorship, we should understand their relative autonomy within the field of amateur practice as overdetermined by a variety of factors rather than merely as the effects of either increased public access and media literacy or deforming ideology. Nevertheless, by arguing that it is a betrayal of amateur practice by dominant ideology, progressive media critics¹³ have held the home mode accountable for what it is not, for what it ought to be: socially or aesthetically radical.

¹¹ The following summary of Meunier's phenomenology of the *film-souvenir* has been condensed from Vivian Sobchack, "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 241-254.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 67.

¹³ For examples, see Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995; Laurie Ouellette, "Camcorder Dos and Don'ts: Popular Discourses on Amateur Video and Participatory Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 36 (Fall 1995); Barry

This position can be traced in part to a series of problematic confluences of amateurism with the experimental cinema of Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Jonas Mekas, whose avant garde strategies and critical discourses flirt with features of home mode practice. Although structured in dominance by radical vectors, their films share technological and aesthetic similarities with home movies, a comparison that elides modal differences of social function in its focus on formal effects. By noting the textual affinities between, say, Brakhage's *Scenes from Under Childhood* (1967-70) and a conventional home movie, critics who champion experimental practice may be led into arguments by association for the potential in every amateur for the avant garde. That is, if Brakhage can reformulate his obsessions with family and domestic life into a radical cinematic vision, why can't the average home moviemaker do the same?

As the leading pioneer of the "New American Cinema," Maya Deren pioneered the connection between amateurism and the avant garde.¹⁴ By setting the private, one-person form of film practice against corporate sponsorship and the production model of Hollywood studios, Deren implicitly marked the distinction between amateur and industrial not so much by economic relations as by her insistence on autotelism. Her definition of the amateur depended predominantly on her rejection of media practices organized by collaboration and division of labor, which, she argued, compromise the unity of personal vision by evaluating achievement according to a set of external standards and consensual goals. Tracing the etymological roots of the word "amateur" to the Latin for "lover," Deren declared that the amateur makes films for love and measures their success entirely by the work itself rather than by the recognition of others. Thus, in advocating an amateur practice autonomous from social and economic necessity and emphasizing unique personal expression, innovation, risk, and experimentation, Deren implicitly defined its aesthetic as avant garde in nature, distanced from and transforming all established conventions.

If Deren conflated amateurism with the avant garde, Stan Brakhage conflated both with the home mode. By appealing to the historical avant garde's deliberate and critical intention to integrate the practice of life and the practice of art, Brakhage made filmmaking the agency of his being.¹⁵ Therefore, he upheld home movies as a practice integrating film and everyday life.¹⁶ As David James tells it, after the theft of his 16mm

King, "Photo-Consumerism and Mnemonic Labor: Capturing the 'Kodak Moment'," *Afterimage* 21.2 (Sep 1993); Don Slater, Marketing Mass Photography," *Language, Image, Media*, eds. Howard Davis and Paul Walton. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983.

¹⁴ See Maya Deren, "Amateur vs. Professional," *Film Culture* 39 (1965): 45-6; and "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 59-70.

¹⁵ "Bridging the aesthetic and the existential, film became identified with his life and coextensive with it, simultaneously his vocation and avocation, his work and play." David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) 37.

¹⁶ "I believe any art of the cinema must inevitably arise from the amateur, 'home-movie' making medium." Stan Brakhage, "In Defense of the 'Amateur' Filmmaker," *Filmmakers Newsletter* (Summer 1971): 24.

equipment, Brakhage turned to 8mm, symbolically identified with home movies, which gradually served as a paradigm for his own aspirations.¹⁷ Like home mode practitioners, Brakhage worked outside of industrial relations but within the domestic sphere: "I am guided primarily in all my creative dimensions by the spirit of the home in which I am living, by my very own living room."¹⁸ In films such as *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) and *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961), Brakhage's dominant tropes of his wife and children serve various cultural functions of the home mode, including the documentation of events in the service of historical continuity. As P. Adams Sitney has observed,¹⁹ many of Brakhage's films act directly and solely to the needs of familial commemoration, in some cases appropriating photographic albums as a scaffold of memory and as a universal signifier of the amateur's desire for submergence of the self within a family.

Where Brakhage reformulated the referential aesthetic of the home mode, Jonas Mekas reformulated the idea of home itself. Jeffrey Ruoff has noted that Mekas exploits the home movie's kinship associations to create a new home for an artist in exile, and has cataloged the cultural functions and conventions that Mekas' films share with home movies: an infusion of nostalgia; a tenuous link to the past, often closely tied to childhood; documentation of family and friends; quotidian subject matter dependent on contextual knowledge and familiarity with the people and events depicted; reliance on memory as an interpretive faculty; celebration of leisure activities; clowning for the camera; casual, first-person voice-over narration recalling spoken commentary; use of locations rather than sets; abrupt changes in time and place; flash frames, in-camera editing, rapid camera movements, variable exposure, and jump cuts.²⁰

From the avant garde practices of figures such as Deren, Brakhage, and Mekas, all of whom appropriated home consumer equipment in the service of radical intentionality, whether to resist Hollywood paradigms, reject photographic realism, or seek cultural membership within a community alternative to the nuclear family, some media critics have deduced that the inherent value of amateur technologies is oppositional, and that, inversely, an amateur practice that fails to realize tactics of revolution must therefore be misguided (i.e., deformed by false ideology).

In summary, let us trace this itinerary. First, the category of amateurism, a strictly economic relation, is defined as a uniform mode of practice wholly constituted in opposition to a narrowed set of industrial technologies, ideologies, and aesthetic effects. Second, experimental artists, such as Maya Deren, reject the utilitarian

¹⁷ James 47.

¹⁸ Brakhage 25.

¹⁹ For a more detailed elaboration of the mnemonic function of Brakhage's films, see P. Adams Sitney, "Autobiography in Avant Garde Film," *The Avant Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978) 208-228.

²⁰ Jeffrey K. Ruoff, "Home Movies of the Avant Garde: Jonas Mekas and the New York Art World," *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas & the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) 294-311.

standards of these dominant practices by privileging autonomous artifacts whose appreciation requires cultural competence, distance from social necessity, and the rejection of conventions--a modernist aesthetic lending itself more readily to reformulation than articulation. Third, artists such as Brakhage and Mekas, for whom amateur practice consists of eliminating the distinction between life and art, link the home mode, concerned with integrating media practice with the everyday, directly to the goals of the historic avant garde. Fourth, by identifying the similarities between the visually inventive techniques of the avant garde and stylistically "naïve" techniques of the home mode, both modes are conflated by ignoring deep functional differences and emphasizing superficial technological aesthetic correspondences. Fifth, progressive media critics invested in advocating radical practice turn to these artists and to this narrow alignment of the avant garde and home modes as "proof" of amateurism's revolutionary potential. Finally, condemning the home mode's conservative functions as betraying this potential, these critics hold its practitioners accountable to the intentions of the avant garde and the ideological conditioning of false consciousness. Failing to see the avant garde and home modes as relatively autonomous, both of which may surface within a single amateur artifact, they oppose the home mode as the avant garde's antithesis.

Media Mythologies: the revolution will be videotaped

This itinerary undergirds the utopian faith of progressive media discourse in a "pure" radical intentionality that will counteract all aspects of dominant ideology and practice. Its final conclusion not only disregards the cultural origins and social functions of the home mode, it appeals to a set of myths about the future media "revolution" that so far have failed to materialize. For instance, the myth of art/life practice that has linked the avant garde and home modes betrays a fundamental paradox that must be interrogated. As Peter Bürger reminds us,

the avant-gardistes' attempt to reintegrate art into the life process is itself a profoundly contradictory endeavor. For the (relative) freedom of art vis-a-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance.²¹

Thus, if the home mode may be condemned for constructing alienating ideal representations that misrecognize the real conditions of everyday life, any realization of the avant garde's goal of art/life practice would prove equally alienating in its inevitable incapacity to recognize its own critical function. Does this choice of alternatives suggest, therefore, that both the avant garde and home modes are doomed to alienation

²¹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 50.

and duplicity? Only if we succumb to a theoretical dichotomy that opposes leisure/work and art/life as antithetical binaries.

Victor Turner proposes a more complex notion of leisure that revises its simplistic equation with distraction by Marxist fundamentalists.²² Turner argues that leisure arises not from the alienation of labor, but when the limits of what constitutes work become more arbitrary, when society ceases to govern its activities by means of common ritual obligations, causing some activities to become subject to individual choice. Providing freedom from institutional obligations and chronological, regulated rhythms in order to enter new symbolic worlds of play, leisure constructs a liminal sphere in which to explore personal identity.²³

This view of leisure acknowledges a space for tactics to negotiate private and public life and to construct a more positive image of the everyday outside the confining strictures of work. We might argue, therefore, that the home mode's ideal representations signify not alienation, but an alternative vision of the world that implies a critique of existing social formations.²⁴ In this sense, by their efforts to construct a utopian vision of the world, the avant garde and home modes intersect in their imagination of social alternatives. Although less radical than the avant garde, the home mode, nevertheless, does bear an implicit critical function, which counters conceptions of its practices as wholly expressive of dominant ideology.

A second myth of the avant garde is that its practices are more "democratic" than the home mode. Like the myth of art/life practice, the myth of democratic practice suffers from an internal contradiction: if the activist community seeks to democratize media production, its effects are still electoral rather than genuinely collective. Like Michael Moore and his "TV Nation," one individual generally speaks for the rest. In part determined by the apparatus, whose eyepiece lends itself to the vision of an individual consciousness, typical activist films and videos tend to express a single perspective and sensibility. Dziga Vertov himself, often cited as the father of avant garde media practice, affirmed the connection between the camera lens and the filmmaker's unique subjectivity: "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see."²⁵

²² See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) 36-40.

²³ "Leisure can be conceived of as a betwixt-and-between, a neither-this-nor-that domain between two spells of work or between occupational and familial and civic activity." Turner 40.

²⁴ "To explain the public's attraction to a medium, one must look not only for ideological manipulation but also for the kernel of utopian fantasy whereby the medium constitutes itself as a projected fulfillment of what is desired and absent within the status quo." Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 224.

²⁵ Dziga Vertov, "The Writings of Dziga Vertov." trans. S. Brody, *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970) 359.

Jay Ruby has observed that the activist filmmaker's view of the world is paramount, even when his goal may be to document the lives of a community in which he participates:

The possibility of feedback did cause the makers to think about the community impact of their work. However, it did not necessarily indicate a significant alteration of the relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed. The directors may have come from the communities they filmed but most continued the dominant pattern of maintaining control over the production of the film as an artist.²⁶

An accumulation of privileged, atomized perspectives, the "collective" nature of radical practice seems more feudal than democratic, its noble intentions courting attention among those willing and able to give the activist his due.

To argue that the home mode is simply a private, personal form of expression opposed to the public, collective expression of the activist mode must ignore the avant garde's own history of idiosyncratic visions and electoral artifacts proxying for truly democratic media production, as well as the home mode's social function as a tool for community integration. Because they are personally involved behind and in front of the camera, and deeply invested during exhibition, home mode practitioners exercise a vital role in all aspects of production and reception, perhaps more so than in any other media practice available. Roger Odin writes:

The institution of home movies produces a spectator who is more a "participant" than a real spectator: he takes part in the direction of the film (having held the camera), in the action taking place on screen (having been filmed), in the installation of the projection equipment (having set up the screen and projector), and, finally, in this type of event that consists of the collective creation of a memorial diegesis by the members of the family.²⁷

Within the field of home mode practice, therefore, the range of roles available can be seen as more democratic than in the field of activist practice. Only when "collectivism," like "amateurism," is conflated with the avant garde can the home mode be held accountable according to these terms.

Linked directly to arguments for radical democratic practice, often cited as its potential cause, is the myth of the mobilizing power of amateur technologies. This myth originates in a faith in the technological foundation of an alternative society, particularly of Marxists such as Brecht and Benjamin, who "tended toward fetishizing technique, science, and production in art, hoping that modern technologies could be used to build a

²⁶ Jay Ruby, "Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside: An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma," *Journal of Film and Video* 44.1-2 (Spring/Summer 1992): 55.

²⁷ Roger Odin, "For a Semio-Pragmatics of Film," *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind*, ed. Warren Buckland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995) 217.

socialist mass culture."²⁸ Like the inexpensive 16mm film formats championed early in the twentieth century for providing the masses with greater access to media production, the advent of video in the sixties proliferated similar discourses of emancipation.

In particular, Hans Enzensberger upheld mobile video technologies for their liberation from the broadcast/receiver model of broadcast television and potential to transform the masses from passive consumers to active producers both sending and receiving messages.²⁹ Not a technological determinist, Enzensberger traced the contradiction between production and consumption to economic and administrative institutions rather than to inherent properties of the media themselves.³⁰ Nevertheless, like his Frankfurt School forebears, he did believe that access to the means of production might be sufficient to begin the revolution.

In his article, "The Myths of Video," Nicholas Garnham disputes wishful thinking that access to the means of production empowers democratic media participation and social transformation. Instead, he argues that video technologies cannot counter television's hegemony if their artifacts lack widespread distribution. Since television is currently the dominant medium of exhibition, control over representation rests in the structures of broadcast, not alternative subject matter. And because corporate financing and frequencies rather than videotape are the means of production that possess real effective power within culture, amateur video will in no way alter this situation.³¹

In summary, the myths of the media revolution that hold the home mode accountable to the avant garde don't hold up to scrutiny. In particular, the notion that amateur media technology can be made to inaugurate and serve a revolutionary counterculture simply by altering its uses must be rejected as mechanistic and empirically ungrounded. More significantly, these myths betray an elitism that condescends to the home mode without recognizing that its conventions exert powerful cultural functions autonomous from so-called deforming ideologies.

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²⁸ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 13-14.

²⁹ See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of Media," *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986) 96-123.

³⁰ Writes Enzensberger: "Anyone who expects to be emancipated by technological hardware, or by a system of hardware however structured, is the victim of an obscure belief in progress" (107).

³¹ Nicholas Garnham, "The Myths of Video: A Disciplinary Reminder," *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*, ed. Fred Inglis (London: Sage Publications, 1990) 64-69.

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