

James Leo Cahill

Anacinema: Peter Tscherkassky's Cinematic Breakdowns

Towards the Unspeakable Film

Now a real film must not be able to be told... The future belongs to the film that cannot be told.

[Or, *un vrai film ne doit pas pouvoir se raconter... L'avenir est au film qui ne pourra se raconter...*] —Germaine Dulac

The epigraph to this essay comes from Germaine Dulac's (1882-1942) polemic "Visual and Anti-Visual Films" (1928), part of her ongoing project to imagine, on the page and in her films, a properly cinematographic form of expression, a *cinéma pur*.¹ Dulac asserts the necessity of cultivating only those properties irreducibly specific to the medium, its cinematographic *essence*.² Her prose draws a sense of urgency from its opposition to the emergence of the "talkie" (*le film parlé*), perceived as inevitably reducing the expressive range of cinematography to forms of canned theater. The realization of the artistic potential of the medium, she argues, requires a film practice independent of all non-cinematic art forms, particularly literary conventions such as narrative, plot, and dialogue. A "real film," in Dulac's idiom, can only exist outside of words ("hors les mots").³ It requires a cinematography—an expressive system of writing, a language of cinema—whose immediacy evades the constraints of verbal and written language, in order to present (to make *present*), at the scene of projection, that which can neither be spoken nor written. The "visual film" will break free from the logos and phonos of language, create a break in it—break

it—in order to cultivate "the power of the image alone."⁴ Dulac's modernist phantasy, "casting a beam of light into a dark future," evokes a singular secret cinematography, a crypto-cinematography, yet to come—constituting the film that must not be able to be told.⁵

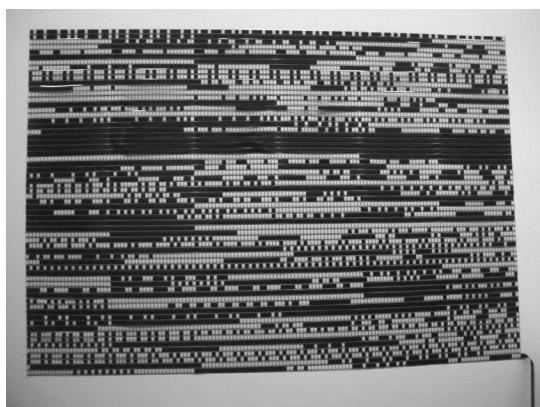
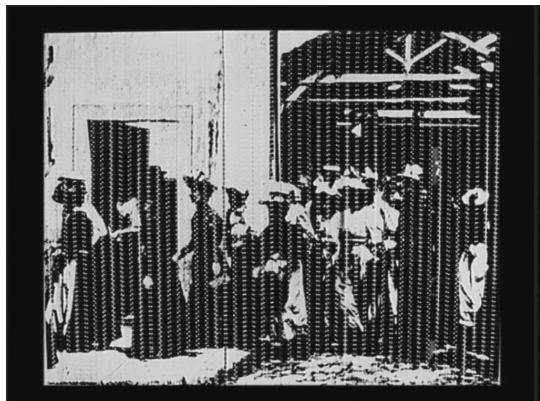
Peter Tscherkassky's (b. 1958) films offer compelling responses to Dulac's calls for a medium-specific *cinéma pur* and her search for the film that must not be able to be told, giving viewers glimpses of something "unspeakable" emerging at the moment of celluloid's twilight. Tscherkassky's cinematography, engaged in self-conscious explorations of film's essence at the historical conjuncture of its apparent obsolescence, operates through techniques that break down, break apart, and break from film. Tscherkassky's work—especially his handmade, camera-less, recycled footage 35mm CinemaScope trilogy: *L'Arrivée*, *Outer Space*, and *Dream Work* (1997-2001) and *Instructions for a Sound and Light Machine* (2005)—enacts a practice of cinematic breakdown that applies an extraordinary pressure to the film frame and its temporal economy of the instant, understood here as both the basic

content of the photograph and the interval that marks its exteriority. Considering the productivity of Tscherkassky's "cinematic breakdowns" by suspending together several instances of breakage from his films *Freeze Frame* (8mm, 1983) *Motion Picture* (*La Sortie des Ouvriers de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon*) (16mm, 1984) and *Outer Space* (35mm CinemaScope, 1999), this essay offers a tentative theorization of an "unspeakable" language of cinema—an *anacinema*—that applies critical pressure to the very possibility of its own linguistic metaphor, and, in asserting an essence, finds itself radically transformed.

Like Dulac's aesthetic-theoretical projects in 1920s Paris, Tscherkassky's oeuvre has developed over the past thirty years (1979-2008) through the interpenetrations of his work as a filmmaker, film theorist, and programmer/promoter in the vibrant avant-garde film cultures of Austria.⁶ The curator and critic Alexander Horwath situates Tscherkassky's work—along with that of other members of the third generation Austrian avant-garde filmmakers, such as Lisl Ponger, Dietmar Brehm, and Martin Arnold—as ineluctably marked by the crisis of avant-garde cinema in the 1970s, instigated by the impasse and sense of exhaustion effected by structural cinema's zero degree reductions as well as the rise of video. Tscherkassky and his peers began working in the medium at the moment when "film acquires the melancholy aura of a death row prisoner."⁷ Many of these filmmakers took to the grainy textures of the super-8 format (unmistakably filmic in appearance and relatively unexplored in relation to 16mm and 35mm gauges) and to recycled footage, making entries into the avant-garde film practices that often traversed its perceived deadlock between structural cinema's ontological examinations of the medium and representational/semiotic approaches to avant-garde filmmaking: engaging simultaneously structural and representational concerns.⁸ One of the unique aspects of Tscherkassky's films is their close attention to the specificities of the film frame in relation to film gauge, be it super-8mm (*Aderlass*, *Erotique*, *Freeze Frame*, *tabula rasa*); 16mm (*Motion Picture*); 35mm (*Manufraktur*, *Parallel Space: Interview*, *Happy End*); or 35mm CinemaScope (the trilogy: *L'Arrivée*, *Outer Space*, *Dream Work*, plus *Instructions for a Light and Sound Machine*).

Tscherkassky's films take the medium's unique materiality as a central concern: "I attempt to create art works that can only be made with film. In other words, if there were nothing other than the computer, hard disk and magnetic tape, then these works would simply not exist."⁹ This ontological assertion—ever precarious—takes form in his films' exacerbation of Clement Greenberg's teleological assessment of modernist production as "self-definition with a vengeance."¹⁰ Tscherkassky often uses an idiom of breakage and breakdowns when reflecting upon his work and its effects, a tendency crystallized in his neologism "manufraktur," created to describe his hand-made, frame-based, contact printing dark room process. A play on the word "manufacture" that combines "manu" (hand) and "fracture" (to shatter, to break apart), "manufraktur" emphasizes the creative and productive forms of breaking that energize his work. He also makes the more general claim that an interest in breaking—the aesthetic breakthrough in the breakdown—subtends all of his work from the very start: "Perhaps one could say that from the outset I wanted to unravel and dissolve the medium, 'destroy' is not the right expression, but, yes, some type of 'breaking,' and in breaking, allowing something else to become visible."¹¹

Tscherkassky's work engages three interrelated modes of cinematic breakdown—physical, psychological, and (psycho)analytic—each of which places considerable critical pressure on the film frame as the basic unit of the filmic economy.¹² First, it stages the physical breakdown or failure of the medium and the apparatus, making these instances a primary event of the work. *Freeze Frame* (1983, super-8mm blown up to 16mm) exemplifies the filmic apparatus's immanent potential to malfunction and even self-destruct. The filmed footage, a dense and textured series of overlapping views of construction sites and heavy machinery (cement mixers, an excavator claw arm) as well as trash dumps and explosions, superimpose construction with destruction, creation and obsolescence. The style of shooting (over- or under-exposed, blurry, and incredibly grainy), the printing effects (multiple superimpositions, hand scratched negatives), and the inscribed presence of the film projector (flickering and fluttering images,



slipped frames), present what Tscherkassky refers to as the “paradise of malfunctions” that haunt the medium.¹³ The film crescendos with a “frozen frame” melting in the gate of the projector. The arrest of the motion picture—and the intense focus on the stasis of an isolated frame, a frozen instant of time—proves to be an impossible image to sustain for very long. The cinematic instant resists contemplation, only yielding to a sustained regard in the form of denatured immolation. To break down the material of film in the act of projection is to ultimately break down the apparatus. The footage of the chemical blisters of a melting celluloid image (the true accident cannot be mechanically reproduced¹⁴) also reveals what Mary Ann Doane describes as the relentlessly linear, irreversible temporal economy of the cinematic apparatus: you cannot defrost time.¹⁵

The burning film frame, the emblem of the impossibly experienced instant that announces the presence of the projector, inspires a moment of reflection on the scene of projection and

Fig. 1. (top left) Peter Tscherkassky's *Motion Picture* (1984), opening frame. Copyright sixpackfilm.

Fig. 2. (top right) *Motion Picture* frame still. Copyright sixpackfilm.

Fig. 3. (bottom left) Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960) mounted at the Centre Georges Pompidou, summer 2006, photographed by the author.

the idealized architectural and psychological arrangements of classical cinema spectatorship, often beginning with the simple act of looking to the back of the theater at the projection booth or at other spectators. The second cinematic breakdown in Tscherkassky's work applies pressure to the relationship between spectator and spectacle, and the suture model of psychological cinematic identification. Tscherkassky performs a double-breakdown in this regard: his work breaks from the idealized modes of classical cinematic immersion, but also invites spectators to break down the facile distinctions—in industrial and avant-garde cinema and theory alike—between the rigorously critical and the affective and sensual forms of reception.¹⁶ Even his most explicitly theoretical examinations of the structure of the gaze and the status of the cinematic signifier, such as *tabula rasa* (1989) and *Parallel Space: Inter-View* (1992), interweave a temporality of reflection with one of sensual immersion in instants of cinema.¹⁷ One often finds in Tscherkassky's work passages that bring together Mulvey's critical “unpleasure” with intense moments of what Leo Charney summarizes, in relation to Dulac, as a “hedonistic immersion in the present tense of experience.”¹⁸

This complex operation is perhaps most clearly explored in *Motion Picture* (*La Sortie des Ouvriers de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon*) (1984), his first recycled footage, camera-less darkroom film.

Tscherkassky made the conceptual film *Motion Picture* by projecting a single photograph from August and Louis Lumière's first film, *La Sortie des Ouvriers de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895), onto 50 strips of unexposed film mounted on the wall of his darkroom (a veritable *camera obscura*) to produce an exposure distributed throughout the individual frames of the film strips. (Figs. 1-2) He then spliced the exposed film strips together in a serial fashion. The film's projection thus presents the single still—quite literally the exemplary cinematic instant—in a particularized fashion: the Lumière photograph, previously flashed on the screen for 1/16th of a second, when distributed amongst the grid of film strips, takes 3 minutes and 23 seconds (3:23) to pass through the projector. The effect, as Tscherkassky explains, is to allow the spectator to perceive this photograph as a "picture in motion, a 'motion picture.'"¹⁹ This image—simultaneously abstracted (as a conceptual film) and magnified in material terms to the level of the particular—appears as successive black and white forms that rapidly flutter on and off the screen. *Motion Picture*'s visual palette is densely intertextual. Both in its form as a veritable screen of film strips mounted on a wall and as a succession of black and white images, *Motion Picture* recalls two pivotal films from the first generation of the post-war Austrian avant-garde that lay special emphasis on the assertion of filmic instants: Peter Kubelka's self-proclaimed "immortal" metrical film *Arnulf Rainer* (1960)—a "first" or primary film in its own right (Fig. 3); as well as the rhythms and textures of close-up shots of 48 newspaper portrait photographs transformed into distinct photographs in Kurt Kren's *48 Kopfe aus dem Szondi—Test* [48 Heads from Szondi—Test, 1960] (Fig. 4). Although the viewer is presented with a representation of the 50 film strips mounted on the wall bearing the inscription of the original Lumière photograph (a representation of the entire film we are about to view piece by piece), once the film begins in earnest it is almost impossible to place the fragmented images into their original pattern, infer a clear metonymic relationship, or discern any independent visual or rhythmic

formula, as one can (theoretically) do with metrical and structural films upon repeated viewings. The spectator is invited to attempt a nearly impossible conceptual task, but also given an opportunity to focus on the sensuality of the very motion of each instant passing through the gate of the projector and onto the screen. The representation of the profilmic is abstracted into a representation of the filmic, exemplified by the flutter of each distinct photograph and the interval that articulates them. This foregrounding of the obscured instants that constitute the limits of each film frame, engages Kubelka's claim that it is "between the frames where cinema speaks"²⁰—setting the scene for a cinematic "talking" cure founded in the inexpressible. The breakdown of the different modes of spectatorship that accompanies the breakdown of the unitary photograph—the integrity of the instant—here enacts the third cinematic breakdown at the level of the (psycho)analytical.

"Analysis" is etymologically rooted in the act

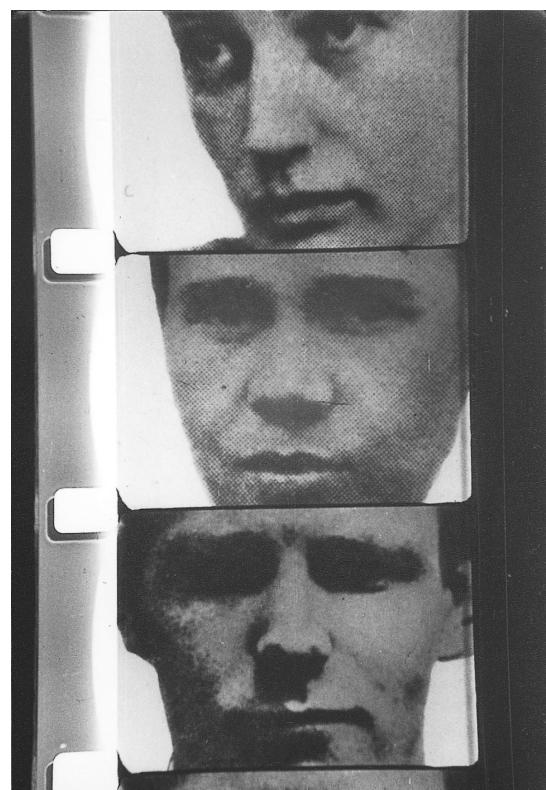


Fig. 4. Kurt Kren's *48 Kopfe aus dem Szondi—Test* (1960).
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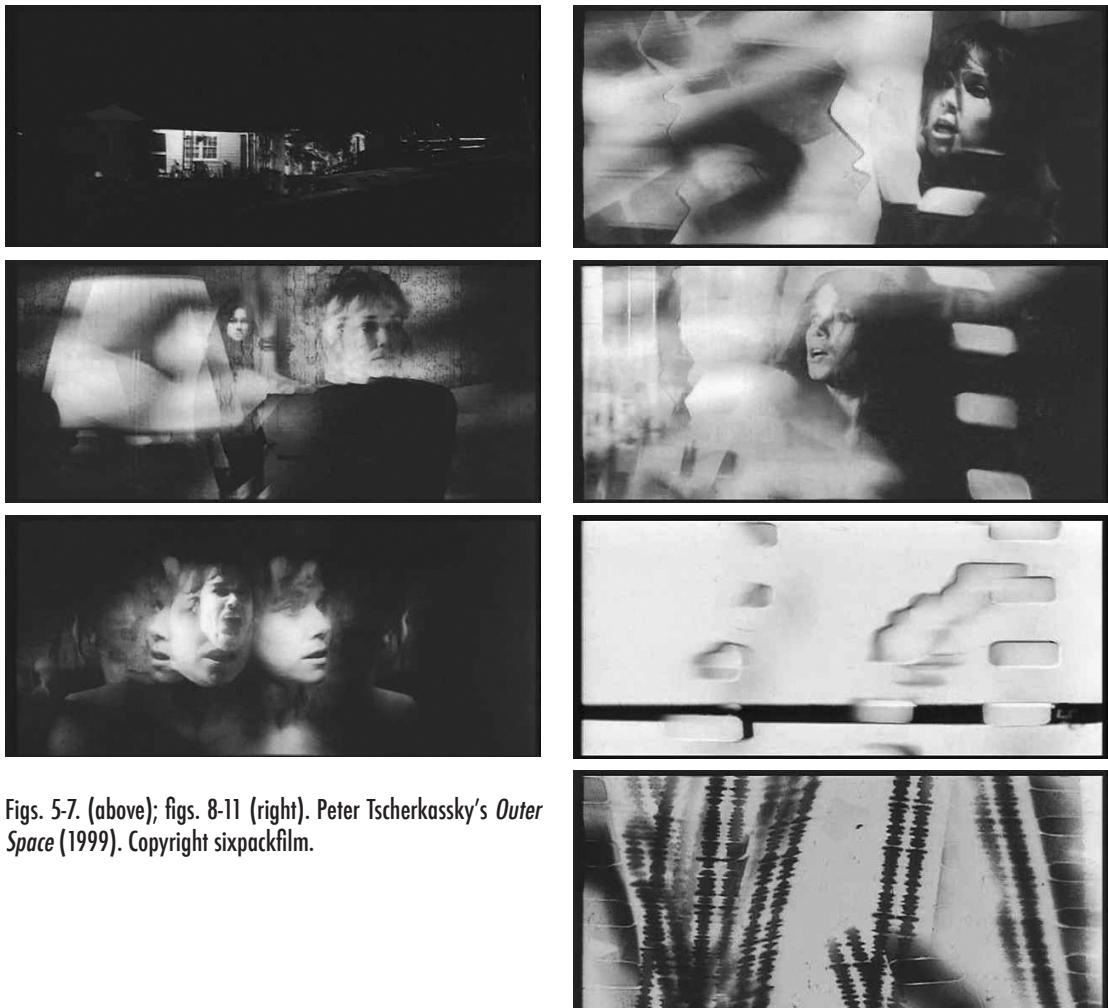
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of unloosening or *undoing*: forms of breaking down that concern the separation of complex objects into constituent parts or elements as well as processes of critical investigation.²¹ In keeping with this double sense, Tscherkassky's CinemaScope trilogy—exemplified by *Outer Space* (1999)—produces a visual form of film analysis. Composed of frame-by-frame analyses of recycled footage, these films give special attention to the material repressions of the filmic image. They bring to visibility the physical components of film's temporal economy of the instant, the interval, the film frame, and its time frame, the sprocket hole. Tscherkassky's analytic breakdown collapses the stable thresholds of the basic unit of the cinematic signifier and its material conditions of possibility. Under such critical pressure the integrity of distinctions between individual frames, the transparency and opacity of the medium, the interior and exterior limits, the explicit and latent contents, and the filmic conscious and unconscious elements begin to come visibly undone.

This third cinematic breakdown takes up Dulac's desire for a breakage that detaches cinema from its anti-visual components, making it "unspeakable" by separating that which is deemed truly cinematographic from the elements of drama, plotting, narrative, etc., and their formalized conventions of execution that comprise the recycled source footage. A certain violence subtends and energizes this impulse. Dulac's contemporary, Jean Epstein, conceptualized this force (the active ingredient of the medium's essence; its analytic solvent) as concentrated within the walls of its "forbidden city, its own exclusive domain, autonomous, specific, and *hostile to anything that does not belong*."²² Epstein's metaphor of the walled-off forbidden city emphasizes the manner in which films concerned with the properly filmic engage in questions of *enframing*, the pursuit of a metaphysics of boundaries through which definition and legibility are secured.²³ Tscherkassky's recycled footage films explore such boundaries by foregrounding the inherent tension between interiority and exteriority. *Outer Space* in particular thematizes thresholds and limits, engaging with what Jacques Derrida theorizes as the *parergon* [*par*: by, *ergon*: the work]. In his reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (a text concerned with the un-

nameable²⁴), Derrida argues that the *parergon* is the central concern of philosophical discourses on art, "a discourse on the limit between the inside and the outside of the art object, in this case a *discourse on the frame*."²⁵ For Derrida the frame acts as both a physical/tangible boundary (as in the frame around a painting, that serves as an inseparable boundary between the work and the context in which it exists: a wall, a museum, the world...) and as a limit(ing)-concept between inner and outer spaces, essences and supplements, hermeneutics and eruptive forces. Derrida writes that the frame is absorbed simultaneously into the work against the context, and into the context against the work. The frame effaces or "auto-obliterates" itself—with a vengeance, one might say—in the process of its most arduous exertion of energy.²⁶ The question of the frame raises questions about the incision, the decision, the break that serves as the condition of possibility and limit of the work, and renders impossible the total exclusion of the exterior from consideration of the interior, the improper from questions of the proper, the question of what lies within the most secretive heart of film's forbidden city and all that is supposedly kept out. Thinking of a cinematic *parergon* in Tscherkassky's work, as the site of his most radical interventions, requires consideration of the film's multitude of frameworks and framworkings: the work of the frame. *Outer Space*, as but one example, involves the analytic breakdown of: individual film cells as discrete units; individual film cells as representative of a time frame based upon the temporal economy of the instant; the framing of the camera (cinematographic framing, the act of inscription and the production of film language); the two economies of framing that come together through the appropriation of recycled footage (Sidney J. Furie's Hollywood narrative *The Entity* (1981) and Tscherkassky's reworking of it); and the ontological frame of the work against other media, as well as its cinematic and extra-cinematic contexts.²⁷

Tscherkassky describes his oeuvre as an "ongoing attempt to create a kind of meta-cinema that invites the viewer to consider the building blocks of the medium."²⁸ Tscherkassky's work acknowledges the traditions of metrical and structural filmmaking exemplified by Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer*, but it departs from strict structural



Figs. 5-7. (above); figs. 8-11 (right). Peter Tscherkassky's *Outer Space* (1999). Copyright sixpackfilm.

approaches both in method—it is not wholly calculated in advance by a conceptual score—and in the turn to an explicit (as opposed to evacuative) confrontation with the representational codes of narrative cinema. He made the CinemaScope trilogy by hand in a darkroom in his home in Enzersfeld, lower Austria, through a process of single frame contact printing. He worked on a piece of cardboard one meter in length with nails punctured through the bottom to hold unexposed film stock in place by the sprocket holes.²⁹ He placed the found footage on top of the raw stock and uses an Opemus III light cone from a photo enlarger and more frequently a red laser pointer like a hybrid paintbrush/writing instrument to selectively—often “intuitively”—produce his exposures, creating shimmering pools of exposed

images against completely unexposed, pure black fields.³⁰ Whereas *Motion Picture* distributes the contents of a single photograph amongst roughly 4,800 distinct frames, the CinemaScope trilogy is marked by a process of radical condensation that Tscherkassky realized through techniques of “optical collage.”³¹ Each image in *Outer Space* contains as many as five simultaneous superimpositions of material from the original footage, and the follow up film *Dream Work* contains as many as seven layers. This condensation (a process even more explicitly addressed in *Dream Work*) also enacts temporal compressions and overlaps.³² Not only does it reduce a feature length film to an intense ten minutes, but its superimpositions and fragments appear to both disrupt and compound the successive unfolding of distinct instants, and

the various profilmic scenarios they index. He inscribes an intensification and multiplication of the filmic instant in excess of the singular time frame of his raw stock. The chronological passage of one frame to another, through Tscherkassky's fragmentations and superimpositions, takes on the blurred temporal forms attributed to the unconscious, dreams, and haunting—which Derrida describes as breaking from a linear “chain of presents,” remaining historical, to be sure, but not dated.³³

Tscherkassky claims he chose to rework *The Entity* based solely upon its plot summary: an invisible force sexually terrorizes a woman in her California ranch house. The selection of footage combined meticulous observation and chance. He carefully studied a VHS copy of the film, searching for significant details and latent content to appropriate for his version. He memorized the structure of the original film and then composed a new “narrative” based around the notion of the film material integrating itself into the narrative, attacking the protagonist, as if explicitly acting out Epstein's and Dulac's notions of cinematic hostility. Each day Tscherkassky aimed to produce several meters of contact prints (which he carefully cataloged as he went along). He would begin work the following day reviewing the work of the previous 24 hours (a meter of negative film takes overnight to dry), allowing him to revise and repeat elements as he went along and develop the film's content day by day.

Outer Space resists being told with any finality. The images and sounds evade easy transposition to verbal or written language, and yet theorizing its effects requires an attempt to do just that. The following discussion of the film analyzes it according to two primary movements of 4 passages each (Figs. 5-11; Figs. 16-18), joined together by a pivoting passage in which the film folds over itself, seemingly turning itself inside-out (Figs. 12-15), but does not claim such a structure is inherent to the film itself. The first movement begins with black leader and the audible hiss of the soundtrack. A canted establishing shot of a ranch house at night flutters on screen (Fig. 5) as bits of eerie music play on the optical soundtrack, produced in the same manner as the image track: by selectively exposing fragments of it with his laser pointer.



Figs. 12-15. (above) *Outer Space*. Copyright sixpackfilm.

A woman (played by Barbara Hershey) faces the house and enters it, through an extremely canted shot of a door, the threshold between the original film's diegetic inner and outer space. As the woman explores the interior space of the house, the images begin to flutter and divide into ghost images: both the woman's body and the house itself begin to multiply and split (Fig. 6). Images begin to divide and ghost at a faster pace, as the soundtrack begins to flutter (Fig. 7). Suddenly the images explode with a violent, rapid paced montage using footage of the woman being pursued by the invisible force, re-cut to appear like she is fleeing from the film itself. The image tears apart, kaleidoscopes, and the edges of



Figs. 16-18. *Outer Space*. Copyright sixpackfilm.

the frame begin to slide violently towards the center of the image, as if attacking the woman (Figs. 8-9). The woman—in fact almost all representational content—is chased from the images as the house begins to “destroy” itself (the shattering of glass and smashing of furniture in the original film), set to a fragmented soundtrack of breaking glass, disconnected tones from underscoring, and the beginnings of an inarticulate scream. The frames of the film appear to move horizontally, as sprocket holes, leader, and the optical soundtrack slide across the frame in rapid succession, recalling George Landow’s *Film in which there appear sprocket holes, edge lettering, dirt particles, etc.* (1966). The image begins to flicker and polarize, eventually reducing content to superimpositions of sprocket holes and optical soundtrack (Figs. 10-11). The violence of the attack subsides into the rhythmic beauty of an embedded flicker film—a modality that Philippe-Alain Michaud describes as emphasizing the discontinuity between filmed time and projected time, the rhythm of projection

apparatus, the reflective surface of the screen, the dark interval between frames, and our own perceptive apparatus.³⁴ The soundtrack reduces to tape hiss and signal noise, the irreducible “noise” of the audio recording apparatus.

The first movement ends and the pivot/entr’acte begins with a slight re-stabilization of the image and a return to the shot of the house from the beginning of the film emerging from within the flicker film. The images of the house echo the set up of the beginning, but begin to superimpose images of the inside and outside of the house on top of each other. Mirrored images of bay windows look from inside onto the exterior of the house, suggesting an impossible, invaginated space where interior and exterior fold into each other (Figs. 12-13). The edges of the frame of the filmstrip move towards the center and cross over each other, as if the entire film has been inverted. The horizontal inversion of the filmstrip is continued with a mirrored image of windows that fold over each other (Figs. 14-15).

The second movement begins with a clear image of the woman’s face, pressed up against a mirror and reflected in another mirror on set, creating a *mise-en-abyme* of representational violence. The image is deeply disturbing: the original footage depicts the woman being raped by the unknown force (Fig. 16). This image solarizes and inaugurates a second flicker film, set to a soundtrack loop of the woman moaning and a loud thud keeping the beat. Next, a rapidly repeating loop of the woman beginning to “fight back” ensues. She faces the camera and violently swings the base of a lamp like a weapon—as if attacking both the apparatus and the material base of the film itself. Once again the image tears and fractures. These images are cut against a reverse-shot of the woman smashing all the mirrors in the house.³⁵ The terrorized woman now unleashes her own destructive force. Cubist-looking images of empty domestic spaces, superimposed in overlapping panels, fill the frame, cutting together a steady-cam shot showing a bed, dresser drawers, clothing scattered on the floor, and eventually tilting up to a vanity with a prominently placed mirror, showing the reflection of the woman. During this, the soundtrack features music and scraps of dialogue—broken down into nonsensical phonemes—taken from a conversation between a

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man and a woman, the only words uttered clearly are “the first time was different, I was raped.” In the original film, these snippets of conversation come from a psychoanalytic session between the Barbara Hershey character and her bearded male analyst (who, in an act of inverted transference, falls in love with the patient he mistakenly diagnoses as suffering from hysterical sexual repression). The final section of Tscherkassky’s film presents a series of images of the gaze, beginning with the reflection of the woman in the mirror followed by a series of superimposed close-ups of eyes without a face (Fig. 17) and finally the slow reveal of the woman’s face reflected in three mirrors—the reflection in the center mirror gazing directly into the camera’s lens (Fig. 18). The soundtrack features tape noise and fragments of backwards speech (the last cluster sounding like the word “cinema”). The image slowly fades to black.

Outer Space acts out the violation and deformation of film’s frames, presenting its instantaneous implosion and explosion. In its destruction of the illusionary articulations of narrative cinema—the language of cinema—and the frame that contains it and makes it legible, the film is nothing short of apocalyptic. In the original Greek sense of the word, combining *apo* (off) and *kalyptein* (to cover), the apocalyptic is a form of revelation, a revealing, and an uncovering that brings something to visibility.³⁶ Tscherkassky’s cameraless cinematographic technique overlays inscription (writing with light) with uncovering: the bringing forth of something from the dark. His exposures uncover unexpected details from the original footage, which he combines to create the momentary appearance—the becoming visible, the *becoming visual*—of an unspeakable film; Dulac’s strange “visual film” of the future, “the film that cannot be told.”³⁷

The chaotic visuals of Tscherkassky’s film, seeming to tap into the energies of a filmic unconscious, produce a disorder and disfiguration of the conventionalized language of cinema. This disorganization resonates strongly with the French-Hungarian psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham’s notion of “anasemia” [*anasémie*], elaborated in his essay “The Shell and the Kernel.”³⁸ Abraham coined the term anasemia—from anti-semantics—to describe the singularity and originality of

Freudian psychoanalytic concepts such as Pleasure, Economics, Dynamic, and Wish, which “literally rip themselves away from the dictionary and ordinary language.”³⁹ Abraham describes anasemic words as attending to the unthought nonpresence central to psychoanalysis: “They are ‘ways of speaking,’ *means of disclosing the unspeakable* in nonsense and contradiction.”⁴⁰ Abraham further develops a closely related form of this concept in an essay written with Maria Torok, offering a theory of the unspeakable and the secret at the center of melancholia (and here it is useful to recall Tscherkassky’s own positioning of his work as responding to the “death” of film), an “inexpressible” mourning fed by what they refer to as “the fantasy of incorporation.”⁴¹ Incorporation is a defensive action against topographical transformations necessitated by the loss of a love object that Freud describes as the “healthy” work of mourning.⁴² Through symbolic transubstantiation, the body “swallows” the lost love object by means of the de-figuration and withholding of specific words, which take on the status of things.⁴³ Incorporation effects an “annulment of figurative language”:

If we are determined to see a form of language in the processes governing this type of fantasy, we will need a new figure of speech in our traditional inventory, namely *the figure of an active destruction of representation*. We propose to call this figure *antimetaphor*. Let us make clear that it is not simply a matter of reverting to the literal meaning of words, but of using them in such a way—whether in speech or deed—that their very capacity for figurative representation is destroyed.⁴⁴

Anasemia and the fantasy of incorporation describe language disorders that break (from) language in order express the inexpressible, that which would seem to be exterior to available language, that which occupies its *outer space*.

In the essay “Acinema,” Jean-François Lyotard argues that the coherence of classical cinema is constituted through the exclusion, effacement, and repression of nonproductive movements and expenditures: banishing the instants of the “acineamic” to the exterior of the film frame.⁴⁵

Tscherkassky's singular manner of attending to that which is exteriorized from cinema (acinema) by virtue of the delimitations of its essence, might be considered a form of *anacinema*: a cinema that, in asserting its essence, becomes something other than itself. Tscherkassky's *anacinematic* breakdowns present flashes of a filmic entity that attends to both irreparable loss (the "death of film") and

the production of the new, an opening to radical transformation. It addresses simultaneously what the relentless "present" of the instant would seem to refuse or repress: the what-has-been of the historical and the uncertain yet-to-come of a future unnamed, which demands the expansion—or even invention—of expressive and critical languages.

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Notes

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1 Germaine Dulac, "Visual and Anti-visual Films," trans. Robert Lamberton, in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 33–34 (translation modified); and Dulac, "Films Visuels et Anti-visuels," in *Écrits sur le Cinéma (1919–1937)*, ed. Prosper Hillairet (Paris: Paris Experimental, 1994), 115–121. From the latter volume, hereon referred to as *Écrits*, see also "Quelques Réflexions sur le 'Cinéma Pur'" (1926), 73–74; and "Nos Enquêtes sur le 'Film Parlé'" (1928), 114.

2 A fuller discussion of Dulac's complex concept of "the essence of cinema"—which may indeed be nothing cinematic—lies beyond the scope of the present discussion. I plan to take up this question in a subsequent essay. For a foundational study of Dulac's writing, activism, and filmmaking, see Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

3 Dulac, "Films Visuels et Anti-visuels," 116.

4 Dulac, "Visual and Anti-Visual Films," 34; "Films Visuels et Anti-Visuels," 120.

5 Dulac, "Films Visuels et Anti-Visuels," 115 (my translation). Dulac opens her essay with a description of the productive work of polemical film theory as "Jetant un rayon lumineux sur l'avenir obscur . . ." The concern for both "the cinema of the future" and "the future of cinema" recur throughout her writing. See especially "L'Essence du Cinéma—L'Idée Visuelle" (1925), and "L'Avenir du Ciné: Une Interview Avec Germaine Dulac, par Paul Guitor" (1927), in *Écrits*, 66, 81–83.

6 Biographical information primarily comes from *Peter Tscherkassky*, ed. Alexander Horwath and Michael Loebenstein (Vienna: SYNEMA, 2005). From here on referred to as *PT*. For an economic and critically insightful overview that contextualizes Tscherkassky's film work alongside his résumé as a film programmer and promoter, see Daniel Herbert's review of *Peter Tscherkassky* in *Film International* no. 1 (2008).

7 Alexander Horwath, "Singing in the Rain: Supercinematography by Peter Tscherkassky," in *PT*, 12–14. See also Tscherkassky, "The Light of Periphery: A Brief History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema," in *Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema*, ed. Martin Arnold and Peter Tscherkassky (Vienna: sixpackfilm, 1994), 11–19.

8 Tscherkassky, "The Light of Periphery," 19, 24. For an analysis of structural film and its impasses see the chapter "Pure Film" in David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

9 Tscherkassky "Epilogue, Prologue. Autobiographical Notes Along the Lines of a Filmography," trans. Aileen Derieg, Eve Heller, and Vivian Heller, in *PT*, 160. He makes a similar remark in his enlightening essay "Comment et Pourquoi? Quelques remarques sur la réalisation technique de la trilogie Cinemascope," trans. from German to French by Pierre Rusch, *Trafic*, no. 44 (Hiver 2002). He describes his films as "works of art indissociable from the material of classical cinematography, works that would have been, in fact, impossible to produce *in this form* by digital means, or they would lose all their meaning" and as works that "could not *in any case* occur in another medium" (86, my translation).

10 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," (1960) *Modern art and modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison with Deirdre Paul (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 6. I am indebted to Carlos Kase for calling my attention to this strain of sadism in Greenberg's writing.

11 Tscherkassky, "The Man without a Movie Camera: Anthony Wagner in dialogue with Peter Tscherkassky," *Peter Tscherkassky*:

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11 *Films From A Dark Room*, DVD booklet (Vienna: Index, 2004), 8.

12 For a consideration of the breakdown and its relation to the compulsion to repeat in the work of Martin Arnold, see my “The Cineseizure,” *Martin Arnold: The Cineseizure*, DVD booklet (Vienna: Index; Paris: ReVoir, 2006), 2-10.

13 Tscherkassky, “Epilogue, Prologue,” 124.

14 Filmmaker Luis Recoder’s provocative performance “The Death of Structural Film: Notes Toward a Filmless Cinema,” presented at the “Deaths of Cinema” conference at the University of Southern California (24 March 2007), was meant to be accompanied by projections of clear film leader slowly melting in the gate. Alas, “technical difficulties” prevented the apparatus from properly mal-functioning. See Recoder, “The Death of Structural Film,” *Spectator*: Special Issue: “Deaths of Cinema,” vol. 1. 27 (Supplement 2007): 26-30.

15 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). For one of the best reflections on the indispensability of the interval (the instant of darkness between frames), see René Thoreau Bruckner, “The Instant and the Dark: Cinema’s Momentum,” *Octopus* 2 (2006): 21-36.

16 For a groundbreaking approach to Tscherkassky and Arnold’s work with respect to the question of audience accessibility and what one might call these filmmakers’ “special affects,” see Michele Pierson, “Special Effects in Martin Arnold’s and Peter Tscherkassky’s Cinema of Mind,” *Discourse*, 28.2-3 [still in press at time of this publication].

17 For a gloss of Tscherkassky’s theoretical debts to Lacan, Metz, and Mulvey in these films, see Horwath’s “Singing in the Rain,” in *PT*.

18 See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18 (a text which produces a radical critique of the arresting power of the gaze); and Leo Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 127. See also Jean Epstein’s elusive discussion of *photogénie*, which stresses the instant and its necessary ephemerality: “the value of the photogenic is measured in seconds” and “the photogenic is like a spark that appears in fits and starts.” Jean Epstein, “Magnification and other writings,” trans. Stuart Liebman, *October* vol. 3 (Spring 1977): 9.

19 Tscherkassky, “The Man without a Movie Camera,” 6.

20 Peter Kubelka “The Metrical Theory of Film” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 141.

21 See the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

22 Epstein, “On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie” in *French Film Theory and Criticism, Volume 1, 1907-1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 314. For the original French see Epstein, “De Quelques Conditions de la Photogénie” [1923-1924] in *Écrits sur le cinéma: 1921-1953*, vol. 1, 1921-1947 (Paris: Seghers, 1974), 137. Dulac also speaks of a necessary hostility in her essay “Photographie—Cinégraphie” (1926): “I am as hostile to the idea of a novelistic or dramatic scenario in the cinema as I am hostile to photographic effects that remove from the art of the screen its spontaneity in movement.” See *Écrits*, 80 (my translation). For an engaging reading of *Outer Space* that also turns toward the theorists of the French avant-garde, bringing together Jean Epstein’s notions of photogénie and the close-up with considerations of the classical film body, see Christa Blümlinger, “Found Face: on *Outer Space*,” trans. Alice Lovejoy, *Senses of Cinema* [2002], posted at: http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/outer_space.html. For a discussion of Tscherkassky in relation to surrealist cinema of Dulac and Artaud, see Pierson, “Special Effects in Martin Arnold’s and Peter Tscherkassky’s Cinema of Mind,” cited in note 16.

23 This line of thought can be understood as informed by and treading delicately towards Martin Heidegger’s notion of Enframing [Ge-stell] from his essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 3-35.

24 Thanks to Samuel Weber for bringing this aspect of Kant to my attention.

25 Derrida, “The Parergon,” *October*, vol. 9 (Summer, 1979): 12. This discussion could also be expanded through an engagement with André Bazin’s provocative discussion of the relationship of the frame to the screen-surface, in “Painting and Cinema,” though it should be noted that Bazin’s argument is ultimately rooted in an engagement with a complex realist aesthetic that holds less valence with regards to the avant-garde cinemas under consideration here. See Bazin, *What is Cinema*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 164-169.

26 Derrida, 26. It is worth recalling that Greenberg’s above-mentioned thesis on modernist production begins with Kant.

27 Daniel Herbert’s “Remaking Film (and) History: The Transformational Cinema of Peter Tscherkassky,” given at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies annual conference, March 2007, Chicago (unpublished), discusses Tscherkassky’s work with regards to the broader cinematic phenomenon of the transnational remake.

28 Tscherkassky “Epilogue, Prologue,” 114.

29 Information on Tscherkassky’s filmmaking practices draws upon the roundtable discussion with Peter Tscherkassky and Eve Heller moderated by Akira Mizuta Lippit at the University of Southern California, February 2006; Tscherkassky, “Epilogue, Prologue,” 148-158; Tscherkassky, “Comment et pourquoi?” 83-87; and George Clark, “Arnold, Brehm, Deutsch and Tscherkassky: Four Contemporary Austrian Avant-Garde Filmmakers,” *Senses of Cinema* [2003], posted at: http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/4_austrian_avant_garde.html.

30 Tscherkassky, “Comment et pourquoi?” 84. Tscherkassky emphasizes the tension between calculation and contingency: “The specific charm of these films is born for me from the encounter of an extremely precise composition—concerning the choice and new arrangement of the original material—and a mode of manual production carrying an unforeseeable element, resolutely aleatory. The work of the laser pointer in fact allows for neither a precise determination of exposure times (and thus the density of the image) nor the exact delimitation of the portion of the image reproduced [recopiée]. The spectator is thus confronted with a continuous fluctuation of the components of the image, which recall their mode of manual production. Added to this internal

instability is an inevitable crowd of impurities, scratches, etc., which constitute nevertheless an integral visual element of the general physiognomy of film" (86, my translation).

31 *Ibid.*

32 For an engaging discussion of condensation in *Dream Work*, see Christa Blümlinger, "Le P.O.E.T.: rêve et film," *Trafic* 44 (Hiver 2002): 103-106.

33 Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4; and Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 22.

34 See Philippe-Alain Michaud, "Flicker: le ruban instable," in *Sketches: Histoire de l'art, cinéma* (Paris: Kargo & L'Éclat, 2006), 120-134.

35 In a question and answer session at Film Forum Los Angeles, February 2006, Tscherkassky claimed that this set of images suggested to him a feminist response to the medium and as an internal response to theories of the violating cinematic gaze. On the "crypto-feminist" aspects of the film, see Pierson, "Special Effects in Martin Arnold's and Peter Tscherkassky's Cinema of Mind," cited above. For a cogent review of the film that takes a slightly skeptical position with regards to such a reading, see Alice Lovejoy, "Space Invaders," *Film Comment* 38.3 (May-June 2002): 31-32.

36 For the etymology of apocalypse see the Oxford English Dictionary. One might also here note reverberations with Heidegger's argument that the essence of technology is revealing-as-Enframing. He argues that Enframed revealing—a mode of calculation—is potentially world-ending, in a sense, apocalyptic. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 27.

37 Tscherkassky's work, made without a film camera, can be conceptualized as part of an aesthetic and technological trajectory that diverges from the conceptualization of cinema through the supposed antipodes of the Lumière and Méliès. This practice draws considerably from animation and decoupage and can be traced from Émile Reynaud's hand-drawn Théâtre Optique animated strips (1888), Man Ray's "Rayographic" *Le Retour à la Raison* (1923), Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963) and his later hand painted films, to name but a few instances. Tscherkassky made *Dream Work* in homage to Man Ray.

38 Nicolas Abraham, "The Shell and the Kernel: The Scope of Originality of Freudian Psychoanalysis," in Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 79-98. For the original French see Abraham and Torok, *L'Écorce et le Noyau* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), 203-226 (originally published in 1977). For an adjacent discussion of Abraham's concept of the phantom in relation to Martin Arnold's digital video installation *Deanimated: The Invisible Ghost*, see my "...and Afterwards? Martin Arnold's Phantom Cinema," *Spectator*: Special Issue: "Deaths of Cinema," vol. 27 (Supplement 2007): 9-25.

39 Abraham, "The Shell and the Kernel," 85.

40 *Ibid.*, 97 (my emphasis).

41 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, "Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation" in *The Shell and the Kernel*, 125-138; *L'Écorce et le Noyau*, 259-275. Introjection is the process of broadening the ego. The original process of introjection emerges from the child's empty mouth in the absence of the breast. Words come to fill the void, giving a figurative expression to the absence of the mother and the emergence of one's own sense of presence.

42 See: Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), 239-260.

43 Abraham and Torok, "Mourning or Melancholia," 127.

44 *Ibid.*, 132.

45 Jean-François Lyotard, "A cinema," trans. Paisley N. Livingston, in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 349-359; and Lyotard, "L'Acinéma," in *Cinéma: Théorie, Lectures*, ed. Dominique Noguez (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973), 357-369.