LOOKING FOR AUDIENCES: THE PUBLIC SPHERE, FILM, AND BILL MacGILLIVRAY'S *LIFE CLASSES*

by

Stuart Poyntz

B.A., Queen's University, 1990

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in the School

of

Communications

©, Stuart R. Poyntz 1995

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

January 1995

All rights reserved. This work may not be
reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, without permission of the author.

APPROVAL

NAME: Stuart Poyntz

DEGREE: MA

TITLE: LOOKING FOR AUDIENCES: THE PUBLIC SPHERE, FILM, AND BILL MACGILLIVRAY'S LIFE CLASSES.

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

CHAIR: Pat Howard

Richard Gruneau
Senior Supervisor,
School of Communication, SFU

Alison Beale
Supervisor
School of Communication, SFU

J. Zaslove
Examiner
Department of English, SFU

Date: January 18, 1995

PARTIAL COPYRIGHT LICENSE

I hereby grant to Simon Fraser University the right to lend my thesis, project or extended essay (the title of which is shown below) to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users. I further agree that permission for multiple copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by me or the Dean of Graduate Studies. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

LOOKING FOR AUDIENCES: THE PUBLIC SPHERE, FILM, AND BILL MACGILLIVRAY'S LIFE CLASSES.

Author: _____
Signature

JANUARY 18, 1995
Defense Date

Abstract

This thesis is about film and public spheres. I begin by investigating how the concept of the public sphere can be reworked in the light of recent interest in Jurgen Habermas' discussion of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere. Although Habermas' analysis of this concept ultimately fails, his work is useful for framing how the public sphere can be regrounded today. I pursue this regrounding in terms of a procedural concept of the public sphere which in large part is indebted to Habermas' more recent work on the structure of understanding implicit to everyday communication. I then examine how this model can be made useful for looking at film.

William MacGillivray's *Life Classes* is important in this context because it opens narrative film to spectators typically excluded from the pleasures and concerns of such cinema. *Life Classes* is nostalgic about a regional culture threatened by extinction, but it also recognizes this fact, and thus escapes mere sentimentality to open up a utopian hopefulness for regional and gendered spectators typically ignored in the globalizing dreams of Hollywood cinema. In this sense, it creates moments when film becomes a public sphere, a place where fundamental social relationships of region, memory and gender can be explored, even if they are not ultimately transformed.

For Penelope, who makes me laugh and always remembers.

Publicity continues to be an organizational principle of our political order. It is apparently more and other than a mere scrap of liberal ideology that a social democracy could discard without harm.

Jurgen Habermas

Acknowledgments

The insights, kindness and support of many helped to make this thesis possible. Ivan Varga encouraged me to pursue my interest in Habermas during my time at Queen's University, while Rick Gruneau, my senior supervisor at Simon Fraser, gave of time he didn't always have to help recast my ambitious intentions for a study of Habermas into a workable thesis. The community of graduate students, faculty and staff — in particular, Lucie and Nina — at Simon Fraser were helpful in pushing this project to its end.

Although we no longer live together, the fellas at "154" — Imre, Dave, Peter, Andrew, Adnan, and Sean — continue to be part of all the work I do. Marcus, Amanda, Selena, Matt and Sadie have shared their food and their kindness with me throughout this thesis.

My brother, Donny has never stopped offering his support. My mother, Freda, continues to give from her heart to all that I do.

Finally, through all my procrastination, pacing and excitement, Penelope has always offered wisdom and laughter to keep me sane. To all these people — my thanks.

Contents

Approval Page	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgments	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter I Mapping the Public Sphere	11
Chapter II Public Spheres and Public Spectatorship: Habermas and Benjamin	34
Chapter III Public Screens/Public Spectatorship: William MacGillivray's *Life Classes*	64
Conclusion	94
Bibliography	99

Introduction

The idea of a democratic public sphere in social life is difficult to sustain these days. Sites typically assigned such a status - newspapers and their editorials; the meeting halls of political parties; the lobbying rooms of interest groups; and the institutions of parliament itself - no longer seem to be truly *public* in any significant sense. Perhaps they never were. The exclusion of key social communities (ie. the working class, women, ethnic and cultural minorities, and communities based on sexual identities) from these sites, the rise of image-based cultural productions (film, video and t.v.) which undermine the relevance of the spoken and written word, and the general disdain which various constituencies hold for elected politicians today have all forced the traditional sites of the public sphere to forfeit claims to open, inclusive, universal and rational understanding. By contrast, it is precisely these claims that define the traditional idea of a democratic public sphere.

Even in this context, however, the notion of the public sphere attracts interest. In part this interest can be explained by the relatively recent — 1989 — English translation of Jurgen Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.* Habermas reworks the bourgeois concept of the public sphere as a normative and historical concept and in this way attempts to extract this category from the limitations of an ahistorical liberal tradition. Recent critics have argued that Habermas' initial attempt to defend a concept of the public sphere ultimately proves too limited — an argument I take up in greater detail in later chapters. Nonetheless, the fact that Habermas' work continues to attract attention illustrates the extent of contemporary interest in a defensible concept of the public sphere.

I suspect another key reason for interest in the public sphere can be explained by the hopefulness that underwrites the concept. I say hopefulness because for me the Habermasian public sphere points not towards a place where inclusive, mutual and rational understanding exists, but to kinds of relationships in which emancipatory activities are made possible in our immediate life contexts. The notion that the public sphere is constituted by particular relationships rather than in a specific place is an important clarification that I want to hold on to. The public sphere defined as relationships of open, inclusive, equal and rational debate creates the potential to identify instances where such emancipatory claims are exercised, even if these instances might otherwise be situated within the machinations of dominant relationships of power. Such a clarification is important for the tasks I undertake as part of a reworking of a concept of the public sphere.

Although considerable attention has focused on non-traditional contexts where a concept of the public sphere is relevant[1], far less attention has been given to the way film relates to and constitutes a public sphere[2]. I argue, however, that the relationship of film to various audiences typically excluded from the traditional public sphere constitutes an important terrain for understanding the development of public spheres in contemporary

---

[1] In particular see Rita Felski's discussion of how the public sphere can be made useful for understanding feminist collectives and organization (1989). I return to this discussion in Chapter II.

[2] This is not to say that no important work has been done on the relationship between film and the public sphere. I discuss some of this work below, but in particular, see Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge 1988 and Miriam Hansen 1991.

late capitalist societies. In short, questions about how to characterize publicness in relation to film and how to think of film as a public sphere form the bulk of what I explore below.

In Canada, an interesting if contested example of how film acts as a public sphere can be located in a particular episode in the history of Canadian film. During World War II, John Grierson's new National Film Board (NFB) expanded its activities in previously unheard directions. In one instance, the NFB developed a peculiar system to distribute Ottawa's new compilation documentaries to the Canadian backwaters. As W.D. Euler, Minister of Trade and Commerce during the NFB's early years announced, the intention of the NFB's rural/industrial film circuits (1942-1945) was to distribute "national films designed to help Canadians in all parts of Canada to understand the ways of living and problems of Canadian people" (qtd in Nelson 1988, 127-128). Contrary to the federal government's stated intentions for the circuits, Joyce Nelson argues convincingly that government propaganda in large part fueled the expansion of film distribution circuits across the country (1988). And indeed, I suspect the history of the NFB's peculiar distribution system is framed in the contradictions between the laudatory aims of the program's designers and its actual achievements among rural and industrial audiences. But I note these events in the history of Canadian film because they illustrate the larger relationship between film and public spheres I trace in this thesis.

Audience estimates for the final year of the rural film screenings run at around 3-4 million people, — in a country of 11 million — while 300 union locals across 84 districts apparently participated in the industrial film circuits (Nelson 1988, 135 and 146). These

numbers are impressive and suggest that, at the very least, the NFB's peculiar distribution system helped film reach an audience previously unavailable to Canadian film. More importantly, once screened by audiences, it is far from clear that audiences simply accepted the messages depicted in the documentaries. Besides the general question and answer period which followed each ninety minute program, there are also signs that general scepticism filtered through many audiences (Nelson 1988, 133; but also see Lockerbie 1984, 87). C.W. Gray, a travelling projectionist for the circuits notes that: "The writer recalls early visits in certain rural areas in 1942 where many people in the first audiences were, to say the least, apathetic if not down-right negative" (qtd. in Nelson 1988, 134). And because the films were screened in community locales and union halls, rather than in the formal and sterile atmosphere of movie theatres, I imagine further opportunities were created for audiences to air questions, pursue debate and criticize the issues raised in the films. Audiences normally excluded from debate over cultural traditions or social policies saw films confronting various issues on the public agenda. And while, the NFB's rural/industrial film distribution program included contradictory aims and directions, it created opportunities for audiences to explore relationships of ethnic and linguistic identity as well as issues of class politics in a local context which might not otherwise have been possible. Because of this, I suggest that the circuits provide one example where film became a public sphere.

The NFB's rural/industrial circuits are an interesting example of the relationship between film and public spheres. On the one hand, the circuits were an attempt to use documentary films for functions normally assigned to the traditional bourgeois public

sphere: to provide information and to rationally convince audiences about the merits of government directives (*Bacon for Britain* 1941; *Farm Front* 1943; *The Main Dish* 1943; *Democracy at War* 1944; and *Partners in Production* 1944). Even more, the screenings were followed by public discussion, and while film screenings are not normally thought of as instances of publicness, the question/debate format which followed the films resonates with the typical aims of a public sphere. And yet, on the other hand, it is also clear that these film screenings are not public in the traditional sense.

First, NFB documentaries may appear to be simply providing information to audiences through rational argument, but it is patently clear that this is not the relationship which film creates with spectators. Rural audiences knew this during the NFB screenings. As Nelson recounts, "Quebec travelling projectionist Jacques Ste. Marie later remembered audience response in this way: 'They're all propaganda films, government propaganda films'" (qtd. in Nelson 1989, 134). If the films were recognized by the audiences as mere propaganda, descriptions of the films as rational must give way to another notion: film as spectacle. The films merely reproduce and give to audiences the information the government wants its citizens to believe. In this relationship, the connection organized between the film and spectators surrenders any notion of publicness, at least as this is conceived in terms of rational argument in the bourgeois concept of the public sphere.

If many in the audience found the NFB's films to be spectacles, however, it is also possible to indicate a public function for films which seem to be merely spectacles — but this function is entirely different from the kinds of interaction characteristic of traditional public spheres. For audiences not accustomed to watching films, the NFB screenings must

have created moments when members of the audience could find room to explore their own personal yearnings that otherwise were impossible to explore in the closed communities of many rural towns. For some women in the audience, for instance, it is possible to imagine that the NFB's *Canada Carries On* Series, a series which presented Canada's war effort along with the social, economic and political changes happening in other allied countries, would evoke unexpected responses. The films constantly referred to a changing international community and the struggles of different peoples around the world. For women, trapped by domestic roles at home and on the farm, it is possible to imagine that the international and urban contexts in these films instigated a yearning for a life elsewhere, beyond the limitations of domestic mores in small communities. In this sense, film is public but not in the usual sense of a relationship in which rational argument takes place. Rather what is public about the films are the opportunities they create for spectators, including women, to explore historical memories and relationships of desire not typically represented on the official public agenda.

I mentioned earlier the hopefulness that underwrites the category of the public sphere. This theme is particularly important in lieu of recent work in film theory. Talk about film as part of a public sphere in many ways goes against the grain of much recent film theory. I discuss this more fully in Chapter III, but the wave of semiotic-influenced, psychoanalytic film theory[3] developed over the course of the 1970's and '80's in large part works against the kind of openness I am proposing be read into the relationship

---

[3] See, in particular, Metz 1982; and for an overview of this literature see Lapsley and Westlake 1988.

between film and spectators. Work in this tradition largely begins with a notion of the spectator which implies that film texts construct and organize illusory relations of wholeness that discourage and work against the development of divergent readings on the part of spectators. I don't disagree with this position entirely but for reasons which I explore later, this position leaves little room to examine the contingencies of history in the interpretation of how audiences read film texts. These contingencies refer to moments when partial, haulting but hopeful strains of openness and emancipation are created between film and spectators. Because of this, I want to look at film as constitutive of public spheres.

In this thesis I explore how a concept of the public sphere can be reworked for the analysis of contemporary narrative cinema. Because my interest is in narrative film, rather than the documentary films which the NFB circulated to rural and industrial communities, this only further underlines the need to rethink notions of the public sphere. As will be made clearer, at least in Habermas' initial formulation of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere, narrative, feature-length film is identified with the system of mass communications which threatens the very existence of the bourgeois public sphere. While narrative film may indeed create a fundamentally different system of interaction than that characteristic of the bourgeois public sphere, however, I argue that there are other ways to defend a notion of the public sphere to make this concept useful for talking about contemporary narrative film. I drew on the NFB's rural/industrial film distribution circuit in this context, in part, because it provides an excellent example of what I think is the dynamic relationship between film and a public sphere. What follows is an analysis of

my concerns for more contemporary relationships between publicness and Canadian film. I develop these concerns throughout my argument, in particular through an analysis developed in the final chapter of William MacGillivray's *Life Classes* (1987).

In Chapter I, I open up a preliminary mapping of the public sphere by turning to Habermas' analysis of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere. Clearly, Habermas' efforts to extract an historical concept of publicness from liberal notions of the bourgeois public sphere are an important starting point. Habermas attempts to derive a normative and historical concept of publicness from within the analysis of bourgeois society, and while his attempt ultimately fails, his efforts to extract a defensible concept of the public sphere have important implications for mapping more useful notions of the public sphere. I assess some of the more important criticisms which have been posed against Habermas' analysis of the public sphere. I argue that while these criticisms fundamentally put into question the bourgeois concept of the public sphere, they do not fully exhaust the emancipatory energies underlying this concept. At the end of the Chapter, I assess how we might respond to these criticisms by turning to some of Habermas' more recent work on the structures of understanding implicit to the everyday use of linguistic communication.

In Chapter II, I take up Habermas' discussion of the nature of validity claims underlying the structure of everyday communication and develop this position in order to reground a concept of the public sphere. I suggest, with Seyla Benhabib, that the participatory impulse which Habermas wanted to retain from the bourgeois concept of the public sphere can be reframed and defended as a procedural concept of the public sphere. This concept escapes the limitations which critics have charged against Habermas' original

discussion of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere. Importantly, the procedural concept of the public sphere also resonates with recent claims made about certain contemporary Canadian narrative films. I trace these similarities and suggest that in order to map the relationship between Canadian cinema and public spheres a further theoretical tangent is required: in this case, to the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's theory of experience is necessary for suggesting how to trace the relationship between film and public spheres. Furthermore, Benjamin's theory of experience can be linked to the concept of the procedural public sphere by way of extricating his theory from its implicit metaphysical tendencies. The brief turn to Benjamin will establish the theoretical scaffolding to begin analyzing William MacGillivray's *Life Classes*.

In Chapter III, I locate various ways in which *Life Classes* opens up aleatory moments for spectators typically excluded from the concerns of narrative films and the official public sphere. I draw here on Oskar Negt's and Alexander Kluge's notions of production public spheres and alternative public spheres to translate some of the methodological concerns drawn from Benjamin's understanding of cinema into talk of public spheres. I argue that while *Life Classes* is not a revolutionary film, the conditions under which it was produced and distributed, as well as the possibilities for new spectator relationships which the film creates, make it an interesting instance where moments of procedural publicness are created in Canadian cinema.

Life Classes is not the same kind of public sphere that I suggested can be seen in the NFB's rural/industrial film circuits, however, there are similarities. Both were produced under conditions in which Canadian film is a marginal form of cinema: on the

NFB rural/industrial circuits, many of the audiences had no access to film, and if they did, it was generally to Hollywood cinema; and, although *Life Classes* did receive good public reception, Canadian film remains a marginal presence for most movie-goers in Canada. Because of this, in both circumstances, conditions exist whereby audiences can make unexpected use of film. Both the NFB film circuits and *Life Classes* create partial, fragmented but nonetheless important instances where spectators can use film for their own ends. In this sense, both create emancipatory possibilities that I suggest are part of the development of procedural public spheres.

Chapter I:
Mapping the Public Sphere

> The characteristic weakness of virtually all forms of the bourgeois public sphere derives from this contradiction: namely that the bourgeois public sphere excludes substantial life-interests and nevertheless claims to represent society as a whole. To enable it to fulfil its own claims, it must be treated like the laurel tree in Brecht's *Stories from the Calender* about which Mr. K. says: it is trimmed to make it even more perfect and even more round until there is nothing left.
>
> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge,
> *The Public Sphere and Experience*

One of Jurgen Habermas' earliest works may seem an anachronistic point to begin mapping the public sphere in relation to film. It has very little to say about mechanically mediated communication and what it does say is not terribly helpful for the discussion of film. Nonetheless, what this early work does is help to outline the critical, emancipatory energies which have surrounded Habermas' preoccupations with a concept of the public sphere. The normative/historical facet underlying Habermas's concept of publicness provides a starting point from which the analysis of a Canadian film and the public sphere can usefully begin.

Habermas' efforts to map the historical rise and transformation of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere mark out one of his early attempts to materially reground the emancipatory elements of a critical theory of capitalist societies. Adorno and Horkheimer, his predecessors in the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory, had pushed such emancipatory possibilities to the brink of extinction. Their critical assault on the instrumental logic of capitalist production and reproduction seemed to offer little space for emancipatory change in advanced capitalist societies. The reified domain of the "culture

industries" was for Adorno and Horkheimer little more than a wasteland of instrumentality, standardization and dehumanization (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972, 120-167). At best the potential for "authentic" critical experience was left to the increasingly rarefied realm of an avant-garde art based on non-identity (Wellmer 1991, 32). Habermas' efforts in *Structural Transformation*, by his own later admission[1], do not succeed in overcoming the limitations of Adorno and Horkheimer's work. Still, there are glimmers of emancipatory practices within Habermas's discussion of the public sphere which provide a point of departure to develop a more complex notion of publicness applicable for cultural studies in late twentieth century capitalist societies.

The advantages to the way Habermas develops his analysis of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere shed light on directions he did not pursue in the text. Habermas has pursued some of these directions on the level of a normative theory of communicative action in his later work and I will take up some of this discussion in Chapter II. But what distinguishes the model Habermas sets out in *Structural Transformation* is the historical and normative framework he relies on to analyze a particular concept of the public sphere taking shape in conjunction with the development of liberal capitalism in Northern Europe. This historical/normative focus, while insufficient on its own, points to a conceptually distinct normative practice that I want to salvage from Habermas's early mapping of the public sphere and develop for film studies today.

---

[1] See Habermas' more recent comments on problems in his original examination of the bourgeois public sphere (1992).

To accomplish this I begin by outlining the bourgeois concept of the public sphere Habermas developed in *Structural Transformation*, including the virtual negation of this concept which he sees in the growth of monopoly capitalism and the bureaucratic welfare state. I follow by outlining some key criticisms that have been directed against his analysis of the bourgeois public sphere. The chapter concludes with a brief assessment of the status of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere and the avenues available in the context of film to redeem the emancipatory energies it seemed to promise.

Habermas's historical analysis of the bourgeois public sphere attempts to draw out a critical potential from liberalism without falling victim to the limitations and exclusions from participation which have historically surrounded the practices and institutions of liberal democracy. He begins "[w]ith the emergence of early finance and trade capitalism" in the thirteenth century which allowed "the elements of a new social order" to take shape (Habermas 1989, 14). Habermas remains indebted to Marx when he suggests that the formation of liberal capitalism and the development of an administrative state underlie the coming to be of the public sphere. The historical conditions underlying the development of early capitalism carried out over the course of three centuries of development eventually lead to the transformation of the old economic and political order of feudalism. Such movements as "the traffic in commodities and news created by early capitalist long distance trade" could be accommodated in the institutions of the old society as long as they did not push too hard at the seams of its institutional structures (Habermas 1989, 15). But this begins to happen as soon as trade, leading to the circulation of news about the price of livestock and the conditions of trade routes as well as information circulated from

the state to the population at large, begins to explode the conditions of publicness which had been part of feudal society.

Prior to the development of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere, a concept of the public was developed in the sense of what Habermas calls *representative* publicness. Its etymological and institutional basis lies in feudal society. Here, to be public is to perform *before* the people in some fashion, displaying a "status attribute" to represent the country or serfdom as a whole (Habermas 1989, 5-12). Not representing these orders *for* the people, the point is the performance of representation itself.

"The reduction in the kind of publicity involved in representation ... created room for another sphere known as the public sphere, ... the sphere of public authority" (Habermas 1989, 18). The increasingly free traffic in commodities, including social labour and more and more, news in the form of a press, begin to explode older notions of publicness, Habermas argues, particularly as mercantile capitalism gives way to liberal capitalism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The concept of civil society took shape in this context as the private exchange of commodities begins to dominate economic production and reproduction. Along with this a sphere of public authority initially takes shape as a specifically state related form concerned with administrative regulation, including most importantly, taxation.

Rather instructively, Habermas labels this environment the sphere of publicness regulated by the threat of violent coercion in the form of the police, the army and administrative institutions (Habermas 1989, 30). If civil society begins to take shape as part of the privatization of economic reproduction in the free movement of commodities,

social labour and, as we shall see, the patriarchal nuclear family, however, "activities and dependencies hitherto relegated to the framework of the household economy emerged from this confinement into the public sphere" (Habermas 1989, 19). The development of the public and depersonalized state also has its corollary in a newly forming public sphere, whose emphatic conditions separate it from both the privatized world of the economy and the family as well as the specific coercive workings of the liberal state: it is the *authentic* public sphere of non-coercive regulation.

Habermas is aware of the particular class — the bourgeoisie — for whom this newly developing publicness is taking shape. But the point remains that "the authorities" in the newly developing liberal state were themselves addressing "their promulgations to *the* public, that is, in principle to all subjects" (Habermas 1989, 22). Within the public sphere of civil society, issues previously unproblematized were increasingly opening up for debate that at least in principle were open to all concerned.

The economy and the depersonalized state provided one set of axes in the formation of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere. Habermas also argues that two sorts of social structures created the conditions for the specific kind of subjectivity to develop which would underwrite the normative claims of bourgeois publicness. In my view, this is the most interesting part of Habermas' analysis. He suggests that a particular normative subjectivity only developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through certain institutional practices. These practices both set out new normative criteria of understanding but also provided for the critique of the forms of institutionalization which act as their very conditions of possibility. Such developments provided the

foundation for the forms of interaction and critical-rational argumentation that developed in the salons and coffee houses of an expanding literary public between the end of the seventeenth and the middle of the eighteenth centuries, and the specific orientation of private people to a public audience which took shape through the institutionalization of the patriarchal nuclear family.

"[T]he coffee houses in their golden age ... and the salons" in France between the period of "regency and revolution ... were centres of criticism — literary at first, then also political" (Habermas 1989, 32). They provided an environment in which a public sphere took hold, shifting the sense of publicness from the nobility's ability to represent before a public to the display of rational-critical debate as itself the sole criterion by which issues and opinions would be raised and judged. The expanding bourgeoisie developed a manner of social intercourse which formally at any rate disregarded status as the criterion by which opinions would be judged: the "authority of the better argument [carried] the day" (Habermas 1989, 37). This allowed for a problematization of areas until then restricted for the most part to the power of the State or the Church, including art, philosophy and literature. If the coffee houses were constitutive of a period of transition to a bourgeois model of the public sphere, the patriarchal conjugal family, itself developed through a period of transitions in the emergence of liberal capitalism, in turn provided key audience orientations during the early formation of the public sphere.

The privatization of the bourgeois family in the household was one of the key institutional changes brought about with the privatization of economic reproduction from the early finance capitalism of the thirteenth century onwards. What this privatization

entailed most importantly was a separation between the privacy of the home and the publicness of the communal court of the pre-bourgeois nobility (Habermas 1989, 44). Habermas points out that the structure of architecture in new bourgeois homes indicates the importance of this new divide between public and private. No longer were court yards the centre around which the home was organized.

> The *public* character of the extended family's parlour, in which the lady of the house at the side of its master performed the *representative* functions before the domestic servants and neighbours, was replaced by the conjugal family's living room into which the spouses with their smaller children retired from the personnel (Habermas 1989, 45).

The very fact of a private space which would reproduce the workers and the consumers needed as socially necessary labour for liberal capitalism had its corollary effect however, in forming a particular type of privatized subjectivity separated off from the public world per se, but oriented to a public world nonetheless.

The bourgeois family seemed to privatize the reproduction of workers and capital and in so doing, interpreted their apparent control over their destiny as something uniquely *human* and self-reflexively under their control. From here, while the bourgeois family was still oriented to a public, it approached this public, Habermas argues, as privatized individuals partaking of the "voluntariness, community of love and cultivation" being worked out in the privatized family setting (Habermas 1989, 47). These qualities transcended the functional role the family had in liberal capitalism and provided for a particular kind of rational-critical orientation within public life. This is the case even if, at the same time, the patriarchal conjugal family revealed contradictions within its very

structure[2]. By contrast, the subjectivity forming within the patriarchal conjugal family developed in a manner oriented to the public debate of issues effecting privatized citizens. In combination with the developing world of letters oriented to a public engaged in debate over issues of law, among other concerns, as well as with the rational-critical debate within the coffee houses and salons this subjectivity became the basis of a newly forming bourgeois concept of the public sphere.

The ideal institutionalization of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas suggests, is to be found at the end of the eighteenth century in Great Britain. Here a new type of association defined by criteria such as "equality, mutual respect, general accessibility and potential openness to all subjects and subject matter" took hold in public environments of debate and the political institutions of parliament and the law (Hansen 1991, 8). Particular material conditions set the ground for a new normative framework in which participants regulate their actions through the rational-critical interaction of privatized people engaging with issues relevant to all concerned. An arena in society distinct from the typical Hegelian trilogy of the State, Civil Society and the Family is thus set out; the public sphere as a category of bourgeois society is a fourth space where participants come together from privatized, patriarchal families to engage in the particular activity of discussion/argument with the purpose of coming to some sort of understanding, uncoerced

---

[2] I am thinking here of the specific patriarchal nature of the new nuclear family and, for that matter, participation in the public sphere. As I argue below, neither the conjugal family nor the public sphere was as open or as human as was claimed. Its very constitution was framed through the exclusion of others, most importantly women and the working class.

except by the force of the better argument (Hansen 1991, 8).

Through this complication of the schema mapping different spheres of society, Habermas also complicates typical separations between private and public spheres[3]. The public sphere is an historical category whose coming into being can be mapped from particular socio-cultural-economic changes present in Europe over the course of liberal capitalism. This space creates particular normative criteria by which judgements on legitimate authority come to be made. One conclusion I will eventually want to draw from this is that the historical/normative connections between private and public spheres are not entirely reducible to one kind of prototypical form that they might take in specific historical circumstances. This position is implicit to the discussion of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere in *Structural Transformation* although it is difficult to defend clearly because of the level at which the critical potentials of the public sphere are developed in this work.

Significant to the ideal institutionalization of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere is the fact that its rise to prominence in Great Britain occurred simultaneously with that period in Great Britain's history when it held international military and market dominance. If we find here the ideal development and institutionalization of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere then, we also unearth a key theme underlying its transformation. In the end, "the fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came

---

[3] For an outline of this complication, see Fraser 1989, 122-129.

together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple" (Habermas 1989, 56).

The public sphere as a distinct social space from the administrative state and the private realm of social labour, commodity exchange and the family developed a kind of rational, critical debate which in the end denied the very conditions that underwrote its historical coming to be. Such contingencies as status may not have appeared relevant for the criteria used to judge opinions and decisions in the public sphere but, at the very least, it was exactly the contingencies of a bourgeois class society which brought this concept into being in the first place. For Habermas, to ignore these contingencies is not, at least at this point in his work, to undermine the value of this emphatic notion of publicness. Rather it locates the point at which ideology begins and the public sphere itself undergoes dramatic change. Habermas, with much debt to Marx[4], traces the historical mutations of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere, not in order to deny its material conditions of possibility but to suggest how in the face of these material conditions a critical-rational potential might be salvaged by making the public sphere conscious of its own history.

The transformation of the bourgeois public sphere begins as the crises potential within capitalist relations of production begin to develop and increasingly, on the one hand the working class demands equal access to the political institutions of the public sphere and, on the other hand, the state enters into economic relationships in order to ameliorate

---

[4] Habermas' talk of ideology in the public sphere relies in large part on Marx's early distinction, made in *On the Jewish Question*, between *political* emancipation and *human* emancipation (Habermas 1989, 123).

some of the more damaging effects of capitalist production and distribution (Habermas 1989, 140). These are the conditions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which Habermas identifies as the "societalization of the state" and the "statification of society" (Habermas 1989, 139). They will bring about a fundamental transformation of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere.

The working class' demands for distributive equilibrium in the economic sphere were managed through the state, eventually in the form of administratively organized collective bargaining arrangements. This encouraged the expansion of what Habermas will later call the systemic media of power[5] in order to organize the affairs of the still private economy within the increasingly bureaucratized public sphere. The result is a publicizing of private affairs without the concomitant rational potential embodied in the bourgeois concept of the public sphere; the state manages crises in the accumulation of capital as well as problems developing within the reproductive and normative roles of the nuclear family through instrumentally regulated actions and client relationships. By contrast, an ever increasing privatization of public affairs occurs as the demands by the worker's movements, among other groups, for greater access to public power are managed with some increase in democratic power but also through a substitution of these demands with greater access to privatized realms of consumer consumption.

Habermas's analysis of the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere then, often seems more like a decline than a transformation. He suggests that in the twentieth

---

[5] I discuss this in more detail below, but also see Habermas 1987, 342; and 1975, 1-8.

century a "refeudalization" of publicness has developed which makes it very difficult to pick up the critical normative intent which the bourgeois concept had contained even if in historically contradictory forms (Habermas 1989, 175-176). No more is this refeudalization apparent than in the contemporary mass media. Rather then the world of literature, novels and letters, containing within them some kind of critical-rational communication, the mass media of the twentieth century appear in *Structural Transformation* much like they did in Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the "culture industries". They undermine the very critical-rational potential which the subjectivity born out of the world of letters and salons seemed to uphold.

> When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labour also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode (Habermas 1989, 161).

The last section of Habermas' discussion suggests where the traces of normative criteria within the bourgeois public sphere might be found in late capitalist societies. His list of sites capable of re-grounding the critical energies within critical theory in contemporary society essentially amounts to what Miriam Hansen calls the 1960's version of the "long march through the institutions"; that is, democratization from within organizations like political parties, unions and interest groups (Hansen 1993). In the end, the future possibilities left open for the emphatic sense of publicness embodied within the bourgeois concept of the public sphere seem at best rather meek.

If the conclusion of this summary of Habermas' argument seems rather hasty this reflects the strengths of Habermas' own discussion. Craig Calhoun has noted the

discrepancy between the first half of Habermas' analysis and the second half (1992, 29-30). The discussion of the transformation of the public sphere does not live up to the first half of the text where the kernel of a critical-rational discourse is analyzed for its material conditions of possibility. The bourgeois concept of publicness, premised as it is on the rational-critical discussion of issues within associations based on equality, openness and mutuality rises to the forefront of our attention and then slides to the background in the wake of changes coming about in post-nineteenth century Western European societies. On the one hand, Habermas inherits the dismissiveness and negativism of Adorno and Horkheimer's understanding of mechanical, mass mediated communication. On the other hand, he limits the potential revitalization of this emphatic sense of publicness to the internal democratization of institutions predominantly concerned with electoral politics.

Does this mean then that his mapping of a concept of the public sphere is entirely unhelpful for discussing cultural production today? I think not. But the value of Habermas' discussion as a first approximation of the public sphere relevant to film can only be developed by examining criticisms of his position and assessing where this leaves us with respect to the concept of the public sphere.

The criticisms levied against Habermas' concept of the public sphere can be separated into two general areas. They are not mutually exclusive, but separating the two areas will help to assess the kind of theoretical responses needed in order to continue mapping a concept of the public sphere. The first area concerns criticisms developed in the wake of revisionist histories that put into question the normative criteria of publicness developed in Habermas' work. The second area concerns the institutional contexts of

publicness Habermas points to in order to develop a public sphere in the twentieth century. Here key questions surround the limited framework his discussion leaves to account for new areas of publicness developing with the explosion of mass mediated communication in the twentieth century.

The concept of the public sphere that Habermas leaves us with contains an emancipatory, critical potential to the extent that certain kinds of criteria are said to underlie rational-critical debate: openness, participation, equality and fairness. And while the material conditions underlying their development have changed, these criteria in turn are said to transcend the limitations of the their own historical development. Or do they? This is the question which various revisionist histories have posed with the intent of showing that not only was the bourgeois concept of the public sphere not as ideal as Habermas sometimes seems to envision, but also, that the criteria by which its emancipatory potential might be saved are themselves caught up in the historically exclusionary conditions of their development.

Habermas himself noted some of the exclusions which operated within the historical development of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere. The patriarchal conditions within the conjugal family were noted as contradictory to the bourgeois family's own concept of equality as part of being human (Habermas 1989, 43). Habermas also noted the fact that the "liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere" was only one sort of public sphere, albeit the one with which he would be most concerned (Habermas 1989, xviii). He comments on the existence of "the plebian public sphere" but importantly only to say that it existed "as a variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical

process" (Habermas 1989, xviii). The problem is however, that in merely noting these exclusions from his discussion, he does not appreciate their full import for the development of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere and in particular, for the sort of critical-rational debate said to be its crowning achievement.

Nancy Fraser has offered up one set of interpretations which get at the implications of these exclusions in her review of revisionist historical accounts of the constitution of the bourgeois public sphere (1992, 109-142). Habermas may have noted the exclusion of gender from the development and institutionalization of the public sphere but the extent of women's exclusion goes beyond simply the denial of female participation. The very constitution of the republican public sphere during the French Revolution, for instance, was framed around "masculinist gender constructs"[6] (Fraser 1992, 114). It was against the background of a delegitimation of "women-friendly salon culture" that a style deemed "rational", "virtuous" and "manly" developed to underwrite the fruition of republican public spheres (Fraser 1992,113-114). And not only in the French version of the public sphere is evidence available to support this sort of argument. Mary Ryan points out that the republican public sphere organized in American cities during the early part of the nineteenth century was constructed on the basis of the exclusion of women.

> The same stroke that inscribed gender differences on the public as a principle of exclusion placed a *mark* of selective social identity on citizenship in general. Republican ideology held that the female sex embodied those uncurbed human passions that inevitably subverted the self-control and rationality required of citizens (Ryan 1992, 266).

---

[6] Fraser's research draws directly from Joan Landes' work on women in the public sphere during the French Revolution (Landes 1988).

The bourgeois concept of the public sphere did not just exclude women then, it in many ways was constituted through this exclusion. In short, the criteria of intersubjective relations which in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came to define the "utopian ideal" of the public sphere were organized by what Fraser calls a "masculinist ideological" framework (Fraser 1992, 116).

But gender was not the only axis of exclusion. Geoff Eley argues that the bourgeois public sphere also developed through the exclusion of participants based on class relations (1992, 297-298). And again, this is not only a case of ignoring other sorts of public spheres which might contest the authority of the bourgeois model. The practices of the bourgeois public sphere reflected a developing network of social clubs aimed at attracting and constituting an elite. While these practices became the basis for participation in the bourgeois public sphere, they were hardly accessible to all.

> [T]he confluence of these older eighteenth century associations ... with more specific political ambitions during the era of the French Revolution and with the desire for social prestige on the part of the emergent bourgeoisie also produced a more visible push for social leadership and domination (Eley 1992, 297).

With this push for domination, the associational life of the bourgeoisie provided "the theatrical scaffolding for the nineteenth century bourgeois drama" of representative parliamentary politics (Eley 1992, 298).

Tied to Habermas' underdeveloped discussion of the axes of gender and class exclusion is his neglect of other forms of publicness which were not only variant to the bourgeois model but in fact competed with these forms of publicness. A great deal of research on popular, plebian forms of expression has come out since Habermas' original

research in the late 1950's. This research points out that popular, plebian forms of expression were not merely variant to bourgeois forms of publicness but were in fact intrusive and threatening to the "official" public sphere of the bourgeoisie[7]. Mary Ryan has also argued that while women may have been excluded from the official public sphere of early nineteenth century America, women of various classes found other ways of organizing together to form political movements and activities: "Denied admission to the public sphere directly and in their own right, women found circuitous routes to public influence" (Ryan 1992, 284). Organizing in church parlours and homes to set up charity organizations, as well as institutions that "provided education, vocational training, and moral guidance to the poor, women volunteers constructed a private system of public welfare" and partook of "public" activity on the edges of the official public sphere (Ryan 1992, 279).

Now the question is what does this research suggest in terms of the concept of the public sphere that was mapped above. I think the effect of these sorts of criticisms is multilayered but not ultimately destructive to the value of Habermas' mapping of the public sphere. One way to respond to these criticisms is to suggest that while the concept of exclusion explored in the above investigations indicates the historical struggles underlying the development of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere, this does not undermine the full value of the concept. The criticisms which frame the constitution of

---

[7] See E.P. Thompson 1963; but I also found Medick's discussion of plebian culture useful (1982). Habermas has noted the importance of this literature in his reconsiderations of the role of alternative publics and the bourgeois public sphere (1992, 427-428).

the bourgeois public sphere as itself the effect of the exclusion of others do not reduce without remainder the value of self-reflexivity embodied in the concept of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas himself has also made this sort of argument in his response to recent evaluations of his early work (1992, 428-429).

These criticisms draw out the fact that the bourgeois public sphere is both idealized in its institutionalization and conceived too rigidly by Habermas; specific social, cultural and economic arrangements of its institutionalization are set up as the prototypical forms in which emancipatory practices can be conceived. This does not mean that Habermas envisions, either now or at the time of writing *Structural Transformation*, a return to the institutions of the late eighteenth century bourgeois public. Patently he does not: "Any attempt at restoring the liberal public sphere through the reduction of its plebiscitarily expanded form will only serve to weaken even more the residual functions genuinely remaining within it" (Habermas 1989, 208). It means that the emphasis placed on the normative intent of the bourgeois public sphere was not drawn out at a level capable of preserving the self-reflexivity of this concept in the face of the historically contradictory institutionalization of the public sphere and its concomitant decline from the form it took during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Habermas has also noted these implications from the above revisionist histories. He suggests that not only do they threaten to impoverish the normative potentials outlined in *Structural Transformation*, they push at the seams of the kind of historical, ideology critique with which the discussion in *Structural Transformation* finds its debt and normative edge (Habermas 1992, 442).

While the criticisms of Habermas' analysis of the public sphere do not undermine its self-reflexive, and hence, normative potential altogether, by showing the work of historical power struggles in the very institutional structures by which this normative potential is formed they force a reframing of these normative potentials at a different level of understanding. Calhoun writes: "showing how a determinate set of socio-historical conditions gave rise to ideals that they could not fulfil" does not provide enough "motivation for the progressive transformation of those conditions" when the very reflexive practices organized by those determinant socio-historical conditions undermine the criteria of progressive transformation (1992, 40). One of the key implications of the above revisionist historical research, then, is the symptomatic way they draw attention to the limitations imposed upon the bourgeois concept of the public sphere by the ideology-critical framework from which Habermas unearths its critical potentials. Through this the revisionist histories push the foundations of critical theory beyond the norms of the bourgeois model as the basis for the appeal of ideology (Habermas 1992, 442). The above revisionist histories push the mapping of a concept of the public sphere in this direction, requiring a different framework from which to set out its normative potentials.

I think the second sort of criticism levied against Habermas only serves to reinforce the need to rework the ideology-critical framework underlying the emancipatory energies in Habermas's concept of the public sphere. The second criticism surrounds Habermas' talk of the decline of cultural production suitable to the development of public spheres in the twentieth century. Here, I return more clearly to the discussion of public spheres and film.

Habermas ended his discussion of the transformation of the public sphere by suggesting that one area in particular, cultural production and consumption dominated by mechanically mediated communication, threatens to undermine the exercise of a critical-rational form of communication by participants in a public sphere. He is, of course, including the work of film when he writes that no matter how "uniform in mode" the reception of new forms of cultural goods might be, the fact that they are but commodities produced according to the laws of the market means that the "rational-critical debate" of private people coming together as a public is replaced by "public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception" (Habermas 1989, 161). Talk about film in connection with a concept of the public sphere amounts from this interpretation to the exclusion of most cinema from the normative potentials of the bourgeois public sphere. Film is part of the commodification of culture, not only in the sense of the creation of a market which trades in cultural goods, but "commodification through and through" of all that it produces[8]. "The crucial distinction is that the early literary market gave rise to a public discourse that emphatically defined itself as separate from private economic interest, whereas under advanced capitalism that tension collapses altogether" (Hansen 1991, 11). The culture of consumption fuelled by the mass media industries provides products for consumption which only serve to threaten the normative potentials of critical-rational argument developed in the bourgeois concept of the public sphere.

---

[8] This phrase comes from Adorno's late rethinking of the "Cultural Industries Thesis" (qtd. in Hansen 1991, 11).

With this sort of conclusion, examining questions around Canadian film and the public sphere seem closed off from the start. At best our efforts would aim to show the way Canadian narrative film continually undermines any residual practices of publicness that are part of the development of the bourgeois public sphere. Rather then pursue this direction, one kind of response has been to suggest that the emphatic sense of publicness Habermas leaves us with includes too limited a concept of the "public" to deal with the contradictory and ambiguous ways film, or mechanical media generally, create and partake of a public sphere (Hansen 1991, 11). The model of communication underlying the emancipatory potentials within the bourgeois concept of the public sphere is developed from face to face communication (Fraser 1992, 110). Such a model takes its orientation from the historical/normative model of literary subjectivities engaged in face to face communication or at the very least, engaged in critical-rational debate through the pen. But the problem is that when the contingencies of a literary public disappear to be replaced by the "public" communication of mechanically reproduced media, the conditions which make possible the emphatic sense of publicness presented in the bourgeois concept of the public sphere also disappear. In Habermas's work, once the mass media become the dominant form of communication in the twentieth century, the apparently critical potentials within the bourgeois concept of the public sphere, unearthed in Habermas's historical/normative analysis, cannot provide a more developed notion of publicness which could come to terms with the ambiguous relationship of film and a public sphere.

So where are we left? Again, I think the implications of Hansen's critique suggest not that the bourgeois concept of the public sphere is entirely empty but that the ideology-

critical framework from which its critical energies were analyzed in *Structural Transformation* needs to be rethought. The criticism drawn from Hansen targets most specifically the kind of public engagement which Habermas relies upon as a basis for critical-rational discourse which comes to be the crowning achievement of the bourgeois public sphere. This framework of public engagement is used as the archetypical model against which to judge the entirely different form of engagement found in film production and consumption. The problem is that these two forms of publicness don't fit together. And the question this raises is whether it is the emphatic sense of a public sphere in Habermas' analysis that is now indefensible, or whether it is the framework from which he traces its development, and hence limits the diversity of forms of communication within which it could be applied, that is indefensible?

I want to argue that it is the latter of these interpretations that is most helpful for talking about public spheres, film and spectatorship. Returning to the opening citation, Negt and Kluge are correct when they assert that "the characteristic weakness of virtually all forms of the bourgeois public sphere derives from" its ability to exclude "substantial life-interests and nevertheless [claim] to represent society as a whole" (1988). In Habermas' discussion, the breadth of conditions in which a concept of publicness can be applied is limited. However, this is not so much a specific problem of the criteria underlying the rational-critical discourse symptomatic of the public sphere as it is a problem of the historical analysis of the development of this form of discourse. This analysis remains caught in the prototypical form of publicness outlined by Habermas in *Structural Transformation.* Habermas' ideology-critical framework for tracing the

development of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere limits the historical conditions in which these criteria could be applied. I want to develop a concept of the public sphere which is not so limited to a specific form of cultural interaction, but can be used as part of the analysis of various forms of publicness developed in the mass mediated environments of twentieth century advanced capitalist societies.

Chapter II:
Public Spheres and Public Spectatorship — Habermas and Benjamin.

> Chekhov once wrote about a kiss, how it altered a soldier's life, how it made him dream of a rendezvous with someone he never knew. How he travelled back later only to see the faded emptiness of the house, the absolutism of reality.
>
> David Adams Richards,
> *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down*

> The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.
>
> Walter Benjamin,
> *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

Habermas's early examination of the public sphere faltered because publicness was framed from within the bourgeois public sphere's own claims about emancipatory activity. I argue that there remains a residual claim of understanding, openness and mutuality in the concept of a public sphere. Publicness returns us to an historical category of bourgeois society that ultimately constitutes not a faded shell of empty bourgeois yearnings, but a category containing a hopefulness for the possibility of understanding that could develop in late capitalist societies.

Habermas returns to the public sphere to search for an historical concept which locates the very possibility of critical, emancipatory activity. What is public in the public sphere tradition are those acts where a performance both occurs and makes claims beyond itself: rational, inclusive and mutual communication permit certain claims to be made about a social custom or policy, a personal identity or a cognitive relationship with the

world, and by the performance of these claims, an open and self-reflexive understanding that points beyond the particularity of these encounters is created.

If the bourgeois concept of the public sphere was unable to defend the emancipatory energies in the public sphere tradition, another way to defend these energies is to shift the normative potentials for rational, open and mutual communication onto a procedural level developed by analyzing how understanding works in everyday communication. I want to draw on parts of Habermas' recent work around a theory of communicative action in order to reframe the level at which the normative possibilities of the public sphere can be defended. I do this by mapping what Seyla Benhabib has called a "procedural concept of the public sphere", a concept that links the participatory impulse developed in the bourgeois concept of the public sphere to Habermas' more recent arguments about the rational potential underlying speech acts (Benhabib 1992). Remodelling the discussion of the public sphere in this fashion, however, only provides us with a formal framework. From here, I want to suggest how this formal model of publicness parallels certain developments in recent Canadian cinema. By way of conclusion I suggest a route beyond the formal defence of the structure of understanding in everyday communication by linking the procedural public sphere to a particular reading of the theory of experience embedded in Walter Benjamin's analysis of film. Benjamin's attention to aesthetic experience as a separate realm of activity realigns the context in which publicness can be traced in relation to film. This move will provide the theoretical scaffolding for an analysis of public spheres in a recent independent Canadian film.

Seyla Benhabib suggests that the rational self-reflexive discourse based on mutuality, equality, openness and fairness underlying the bourgeois concept of the public sphere is maintained in Habermas' later work at the level of the participatory procedure regulating the "discursive will formation" of cultural traditions, social institutions and personality types (Benhabib 1992, 86). Discursive will formation refers here to the way participants engage in communication oriented to understanding to develop norms for interpreting cultural meanings, organize social institutions and constitute themselves.

Talk of discursive will formation in terms of interpretations of cultural traditions, and personalities as well as the organization of social institutions implicitly draws on Habermas' discussion of expanding social complexity symptomatic of modernity. In his later work, Habermas has explored this expanding complexity in terms of the different worlds which we are offered for conceiving the workings of discursive will formation[1]. And while this is not the place to review what essentially amounts to a theory of modernity, it should be noted that talk of discursive will formation is meant to describe at a formal level processes of interpretive understanding carried out in various historical spheres of political, social and cultural activity (Benhabib 1992, 86). This does not mean that discursive will formation stands outside those historical spheres of activity. Indeed, by turning to the circulation of meaning within language, Habermas' point is to build up an analysis of emancipatory activity from within historical practices. In my mind this is the fundamental difference distinguishing Habermas's attempts to redeem the possibility of

---

[1] In particular, see Habermas 1985 and 1987; and Benhabib 1992, 85-86.

rational emancipatory activity from within the structures of interaction occurring between language users rather than from within the mental and cognitive faculties of a subject. Communication is procedural and anticipates even in mediated fashion, the historical, rather than simply the formal possibility of its occurrence. Internal categories such as a subject's cognitive faculties are not nearly so closely tied to history.

The import of this direction for my purposes is that such a tack "no longer restricts the search for normative potentials to a formation of the public sphere that was specific to a single epoch" (Habermas 1992, 442). We move away from the ideology-critical framework as a means of investigating and defending the normative potentials within the bourgeois concept of the public sphere when our means for defending these potentials shifts from the particular historical form they took in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. They can now be defended through an analysis at the formal level of the way meaning develops through truth claims raised in the everyday use of language. I want to suggest how this is the case through a review of the kind of claims to understanding present in the *performative* use of language. These claims are organized around the formal conditions we engage when we try to understand each other.

The participatory potentials of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere find a new grounding when we shift the context in which understanding and truth claims are raised to the workings of linguistic subjects oriented towards mutual understanding (Habermas 1985, 295). Habermas calls this the communications paradigm. The argument

he develops for pushing towards this shift in paradigms is extremely complex[2], but, if attention is given to the way such actors as commentators on social and cultural productions engage in a performative relationship in order to achieve understanding, a structure becomes apparent. The performative nature of this interaction amounts to the conditions carried out in linguistic communication with each other, or with social and cultural objects constituted through embedded social relationships. Such conditions may not be retrieved in interpersonal communication nor in our descriptions of cultural texts such as films, but they are, nonetheless, invoked by this communication and description. These conditions are both the *validity claims* implicitly or explicitly raised about certain sorts of knowledge that has been exercised and, even more importantly for our purposes, the sort of relationship between speakers or speakers and cultural texts that arises in this process. It is in the warranties underlying the procedural nature of this relationship where we find a reworking of the participatory criteria developed earlier in the bourgeois concept of the public sphere. Here at the level of a "discourse-centred theoretical approach" we open up "the possibility of linking normative considerations to empirical sociological" experiences (Habermas 1992, 448).

"When ego carries out a speech act and alter takes up a position with regard to it, the two parties enter into an interpersonal relationship" (Habermas 1985, 297). This interpersonal relationship is not about a self or an other made into an object of knowledge, although this sort of parasitic communication may happen. Underlying this sort of

---

[2] For Habermas' detailed analysis of the value of the paradigm of communicative action and its relationship to social action, see Habermas 1984.

parasitic communication and central to the relationship between ego and alter, however is the ability to take up the reasons a speaker would give for taking the position s/he has presented. In everyday communication, as a participant in communicative acts or as an observer describing those acts, understanding is dependent upon either our assumption that the reasons an actor had for performing a particular speech act have been met or our ability to problematize the reasons an actor might present for performing that particular speech act has been exercised. This is the case, Habermas argues, because those involved in the creation of meaning, either as participants in conversation or as interpreters of social action, only do so through encounters with "symbolically prestructured objects" (Habermas 1984, 107). That we only encounter actions and objects in the world which in some way are symbolically prestructured and are part of our contingent language community is not particularly new, especially given the influence of Althusserian structuralism and its poststructuralist spin-offs in the area of cultural studies. But Habermas, coming from a hermeneutic tradition, argues that these symbolically prestructured objects "embody structures of ... pretheoretical knowledge with the help of which speaking and acting subjects produced" them (Habermas 1984, 107). I take this to mean that while communication oriented to understanding is always contingent on belonging "in a certain way to the lifeworld" and language communities we wish to understand, implicitly or explicitly forms of pretheoretical knowledge must be accessible to us in some way (Habermas 1984, 108). And for Habermas they are accessible to us given the often unspoken but implicit assumptions which work in the circulation of meaning.

"[T]he social scientist can gain access to social objects only via ... interpretive understanding — be these 'objects' social actions themselves, their sedimentation in texts, traditions, cultural artifacts and the like" (McCarthy 1984, xiv-xv). For understanding to develop within these contingent circumstances, Habermas argues we have access to meaning through our ability to internalize the reasons social actors and participants oriented toward mutual understanding give for their respective actions or positions. This is the case because of the way reasons become meaningful to us in the first place. As Habermas notes,

> [R]easons are of such a nature that they cannot be described in the attitude of a third person, that is, without reactions of affirmation or negation or abstention. The interpreter would not have understood what a *reason* is if he did not reconstruct it with its claim to provide grounds ... One can understand reasons only to the extent that one understands why they are or are not sound (Habermas 1984 115-116).

To understand the reasons for the way people act as they do, we implicitly raise validity claims about the value of the justifications offered in social practices oriented towards understanding. Understanding ensures that we must engage the validity offered in the given case. To engage this validity is to ensure the recurrence of validity claims invoked in the process of understanding the reasons for an actor's position in the first place. Validity claims are not something brought into the picture from the outside so to speak, but that which works in the context of understanding already. The fact that such validity claims as truth, normative rightness and value attachment, and comprehensibility or taste are present in the development of meaning turns on our implicit or explicit reference to these claims. They are part of the structure underlying understanding: check points of

sorts, questioning the assertions, opinions and judgements exercised in communication.

From this perspective, the understanding developed in communicative acts is premised solely on "a recapitulating reconstruction of knowledge already employed" (Habermas 1985, 297). Understanding is not premised on cognitive abilities located within the consciousness of the subject, but on an explanation of the knowledge already laid claim to. How this recapitulation is exercised remains the key element in our translation of the participatory criteria witnessed in our first approximation of a concept of the public sphere.

If the recapitulation of already exercised knowledge is to occur, and this is done in order to assess the validity claims offered up for justification, then implicitly the evaluation of those claims must include all those effected by them. The reason for this is the following: the recapitulation of validity claims is not conditional on the internal abilities of a consciousness but on the roles between ego and alter which we take up in the exercise of speech acts. If this is the case, it is the ongoing rehearsal of procedures — not a priori conditions within a subject — that underwrites the knowledge laid claim to. Understanding can be said to develop once certain procedures of participation exist as part of the evaluation of already exercised communication. And what that procedural basis includes, at the very least, is the inclusion of all those effected by the knowledge claim, whether as a social norm, political policy, or aesthetic and cultural practice. This procedural use of language oriented toward understanding becomes the epistemological "always already" basis of that understanding. Our understandings are immanently forming in terms of the meaning that is exercised and learned about. This, of course, does not

guarantee the knowledge or claims we make about the world but it does constitute a process in which understanding can be seen to develop in terms of the activities of language use raised to the level of discourse[3].

The procedural use of language that acts as the organizing framework for the development of understanding between two speakers and this in turn, is organized on the basis of a recapitulation of already exercised knowledge claims solely through the force of the better argument. If this is so, Habermas suggests an *ideal speech situation* is at least implicit when we work out attempts at understanding, even if it is not enacted in any specific case. It is this ideal speech situation and the participatory criteria it implies that resituates a concept of the public sphere on the level of the procedures by which understanding is arrived at in everyday communication. The ideal speech situation amounts to what Seyla Benhabib has called a norm of *egalitarian reciprocity* within the structures of understanding in everyday communication (Benhabib 1992, 89).

Understanding is dependent upon the retrieval of validity claims and this retrieval amounts to the ability to assess the value of the reasons given between actors engaged in

---

[3] Discourse here is understood differently from the way it is usually interpreted in semiotic-based, post-structuralist work. As John Thompson has pointed out, Habermas draws a distinction between discourse and action in intersubjective communication. The distinction is based on Habermas' argument that communication works through the implicit understanding of validity claims among participants in intersubjective communication. Communicative *action* is the ongoing exchange of meaning within this intersubjective context. *Discourse* results when that meaning is problematized, necessitating the recapitulation and resolution of validity claims made in language, a resolution to be facilitated through nothing but the force of the better argument (Thompson 1981, 87-88).

communication oriented to understanding. To assess the value of the implicit claims on offer however, all those affected by the claims to truth embodied in the exercised communication must have the opportunity to asses the claims made. The universalizing tendency in Habermas' later work then, concerns the procedures underlying the recapitulation of claims to understanding. Invariably this means that a substantive element is implicit to this universalizing tendency. Here the substantive element is the egalitarian reciprocity of the ideal speech situation which we assume to be enacted as part of our efforts in communication between social actors oriented towards understanding, even if, of course, it is not always fulfilled. Benhabib offers a useful definition of the procedural constraints which the ideal speech situation provides. She suggests that:

> each participant must have an equal chance to initiate and to continue communication; each must have an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations and explanations; all must have equal chances to express their wishes, desires, feelings; and finally, within dialogue, speakers must be free to thematize those power relations that in ordinary contexts would constrain the wholly free articulation of opinions and positions (Benhabib 1992, 89).

The implication from this sort of radically procedural notion is that the participatory criteria which Habermas set out in the bourgeois concept of the public sphere can now be reframed at the level of the procedures regulating understanding itself; openness, fairness, mutuality, and equality are implicit to the way meaning circulates in communication oriented toward understanding in the formal operations of everyday communication. From here we might now envision public space "as the creation of procedures whereby those affected by general social norms and collective policy decisions can have a say in their formulation, stipulation and adoption" (Benhabib 1992, 87). The normative/critical

potentials developed as part of our earlier discussion of the public sphere are no longer limited, strictly speaking, by the historical context in which they developed.

The procedural concept of the public sphere is no doubt an abstraction generated from Habermas' talk about the structures underlying the reciprocal circulation of meaning. The way this process is worked out needs to be assessed in specific historical settings in which socio-cultural productions of meaning take place. Habermas' own historical socio-cultural analyses are framed within his discussions of system and lifeworld as action contexts in capitalist societies. Systemically integrated action contexts are those forms of social action set "loose from integration through value consensus and [switched] ... over to purposive rationality steered by media" (Habermas 1984, 342). Here media refers to the instrumental steering capacities of money and power located most importantly in the capitalist enterprise and the bureaucratic state. They allow for "utility-maximizing calculations" through "the functional interlacing of unintended consequences" (Fraser 1989, 117). The lifeworld, on the other hand is organized through socially integrated action of which two forms can be set out: normatively-secured integration organized around an implicit consensus of "norms, values and ends"; and communicatively-achieved integration, generated by explicit linguistic interpretations of these norms, values and ends[4].

---

[4] I have chosen to use Fraser's terminology for describing the different forms of socially integrated action. Her terms clearly separate the contexts I referred to earlier as the distinction between action and discourse in communicative action. Habermas' own work is not always so clear on these distinctions (Fraser 1989, 117 and 139-140).

From this perspective we could envision public spheres coming into being where communities of people problematize previously unquestioned norms and values, or where the systemically integrated media of money and power were impinging unjustifiably on lifeworld contexts. Habermas explores this latter historical development through his thesis on the colonization of the lifeworld by capitalist enterprise and the power operations of the bureaucratic welfare state. I don't want to pursue this direction with Habermas. As Fraser has argued, various questions surrounding issues of gender, public spheres and exclusion, at the very least, remain unresolved in Habermas' system/lifeworld model[5]. Still, without pursuing Habermas' system/lifeworld analyses, it is possible to suggest that the procedural concept of the public sphere points to an openness to various contexts in which one could envision the historical development of public spheres. Criticisms of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere surrounded its exclusionary conditions of historical development but I suspect these criticisms can be accommodated without abandoning a concept of the public sphere altogether.

Along with Rita Felski (1989), Benhabib (1992) and Fraser (1992), the public sphere can be interpreted as plural, taking shape wherever reworkings or reinterpretations of socio-cultural-political norms are exercised. This suggests that the historical formation of public spheres can be traced through various kinds of activities which may not all share the same empirical form of what we earlier called "discursive will formation", but which,

---

[5] In particular see Fraser's discussion of the engendered power relationships which Habermas' discussion of such lifeworld institutions as the family and the category of the citizen do not account for adequately (1989, 124-129).

nonetheless, engage practices that put into question previously taken-for-granted socio-cultural-political norms. But not only public debates or collective formations organized around such a publicist function need limit the characteristic functions and descriptions of public spheres and counter publics.

If the ideal speech situation implicit to communication oriented toward understanding acts as a procedural and a substantive condition for characterizing the development of public spheres, then another direction where one might legitimately pursue the analysis of publicness is in what Felski calls the identity-securing role of different public formations (Felski 1989, 164-174). Drawing on the politics of feminism, here emphasis is placed on the role of group and collective formations as significant in and to identity-developing processes. Publicness is not only about a form of critical-rational debate over specific socio-cultural norms organizing different power relationships in late-capitalist societies. It can also be conceived in contexts surrounding the identity forming work collectivities do as part and parcel of the critique of gender, race and class relations in capitalist societies. The procedural framework underlying a concept of the public sphere can thus be interpreted to imply that public spheres "come into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse evaluating their validity" (Benhabib 1992, 87). The implication of this is that the fate of public life can be worked out by mapping this sort of procedural engagement on various socio-cultural-political axes. The result, in effect, is that "there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms" (Benhabib 1992, 87).

In this light it is possible to begin to bring a concept of the procedural public sphere to bear on film. In a recent description of contemporary Canadian independent film Laura Marks talks about the performative nature of recent narrative film. Canadian films perform she argues when they challenge social relationships of nationhood, gender, class, race or region, and invite audiences to intervene in these same relationships (Marks 1993, 17). When Marks characterizes recent Canadian films such as Ardele Lister's *See Under Canada Nationalism* (1991) or John Greyson's *Zero Patience* (1993) as performative she does not characterize this relationship explicitly in terms of concepts of openness, mutuality, self-reflexivity and inclusiveness. But these notions are also not entirely extraneous to her descriptions. Instead, I suggest that her notion of performance can be linked up with talk of procedural publicness, particularly for purposes of reading the relationship between Canadian film and the precarious development of cultural identities in Canada.

Marks frames her discussion of recent independent Canadian narrative film in terms of notions of nationhood perpetuated in American popular culture. Against this seemingly monolithic opposition, Marks locates her first characterizations of Canadian films in terms of those descriptions of independent Canadian film which developed in the so-called "Cinema We Need" debate. Bruce Elder's manifesto-like essay, "The Cinema We Need", kicked off an intensive discussion in the mid-1980's over the goals which contemporary Canadian independent film should pursue (1988).

Elder began by questioning the potential for "New Narrative"[6] films to challenge systems of technological and instrumental domination (read, the U.S.) which threaten an independent Canadian culture (Elder 1988, 262). Against narrative film, Elder prescribes a national cinema of aesthetic purity. Such a cinema would be experimental, it would be a "cinema of immediacy" and "multiplicity", a cinema of "non-causal" and "non-teleological forms of instruction", a cinema open to questions about the nature of experience, a cinema, in short, which begins with the very refusal of narrative as an exhausted form of expression (Elder 1988, 271). In response to this position Marks argues that while experimental film may stand outside of the market, — including the market-determined wants of consumers — Elder's position ignores questions about the limited audiences these films attract. Elder also does not acknowledge the dimensions of struggle taking shape in more popular forms of film. Much like Piers Handling's[7] response to Elder, Marks wants to ask how certain narrative, documentary, and more experimental films trouble the surface of narrative itself, creating ambiguity around the ideological relationships that define notions of nationhood, class, gender, race and region. And by this process of troubling, how is "the viewer [forced] into a position whereby s/he

---

[6] Elder mentions few examples of such films but I suspect that Atom Egoyan's recent work (*Next of Kin* 1984; *Family Viewing* 1987; *Speaking Parts* 1989; *The Adjuster* 1991; *Calender* 1993; and *Exotica* 1994), which consistently play with perverse formalism and enigmatic narrative, as well as the films of Patricia Rozema (*I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* 1987; and *White Room* 1990) and William MacGillivary (*Life Classes*) fall into this category. On Egoyan's more recent work, see Banning 1994.

[7] See Handling 1988.

becomes the active producer of meaning" (Handling 1988, 287)?

To describe the way recent independent Canadian narrative films do this, Marks employs the notion of performance. In a sense, drawn from the old Canadian adage that what Canadians know most about ourselves is what we are not, the notion of performance describes the fact that Canadian films refuse in various degrees to embrace national icons, definitions of different ethnic or gendered identities, or notions of regional equity. "Canadian films, when they deal with national identity at all, perform it; there's a self-consciousness of the distance between the national symbols and one's personal and community experience" (Marks 1993, 17). The "nation as a whole" thus remains "ill-defined" (Marks 1993, 17). Next to what Marks calls the pedagogical[8] functions of the discourses on nationhood that permeate U.S. popular culture, a positive lesson can be drawn from the fragility which so often characterizes descriptions of identities in Canada. To the extent that a process is enacted in Canadian film whereby relations of nationhood, region, class, ethnicity and gender remain ill-defined, a performative ambiguity calls on the audience to intervene "as subjects ... in the definitions of a nation" rather than as "objects, receivers" of a taken-for-granted system of identities (Marks 1993, 17).

---

[8] Marks anchors her use of pedagogy and performance in Homi K. Bhabha's use of these terms. As Marks quotes from Bhabha, pedagogy refers to "the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation" in such cultural icons as flags, national anthems or taken-for-granted stories about a nation's history (qtd. in Marks 1993, 17). Pedagogy contains "the disunity of [a nation's] people in the unity of grand national narratives", thereby limiting different social identities from taking shape (Marks 1993, 17).

Marks uses this performative description of Canadian independent film to suggest how, in the context of the domination of American popular culture, Canadian film can trouble the lure of that popular culture or disrupt grand narratives of national identity for American audiences. Marks does not refer to this example, but David Wellington's recent film, *I Love a Man in Uniform* (1993), is perhaps axiomatic of a performative critique of the seductiveness of American popular culture from within Canadian cinema. In the film's diegesis the process by which American popular culture seduces and threatens to control, dominate and eventually overwhelm spectators is acted out when bland bank teller and bit-part actor, Henry (Tom McCamus), becomes obsessed with his small role as a t.v. cop. Henry eventually collapses the distinctions between image and reality when he attempts to use his character role as a cop/father-figure/action hero to seduce an actor-friend. His virtual rape of his friend reveals how the seduction of American popular culture can bring devastating consequences through the practices of male sexuality it invites. By diegetically acting out the seductiveness and the destruction incumbent to Hollywood images of potent male sexuality, Wellington's film performs a critique of the authority which Hollywood and its images have for audiences.

Canadian film becomes a wedge in the ideological battles taking place in the U.S. market. Importantly, Marks does not explore how this performative characteristic might in turn be read in terms of the relationship between Canadian films and diverse audiences in Canada. It is in relationships of this sort, however, where her descriptions of recent Canadian narrative film can be linked up to a concept of the public sphere. Marks points out, rather suggestively, that the sources of the performative quality in Canadian

independent film lie in the various communities which recent filmmakers align themselves with and address in their films (Marks 1993, 16-17). Unfortunately, she does not anchor the relationship of performance to these audiences on a theoretical level. But by pointing to audiences who both make use of film to convey messages back to their communities and at the level of consumption, actively rework politically contestable notions such as nationhood, class and ethnicity, the acceptability or normative worth of these same relationships is potentially cast in doubt. This process recalls a kind of publicness to the extent that struggle is opened up in films through the performative manner in which particular social relationships are cast and recast for audiences. I want to suggest that by linking up Marks' use of performative to a concept of the public sphere, Mark's argument can be extended to investigate how one Canadian film - William MacGillivray's *Life Classes* - opens up and creates public spheres in Canada. Still, to characterize this potential in film requires further attention to the second kind of critique which Miriam Hansen, among others, has directed at Habermas's early formulation of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere: the need to work out a concept of publicness broad enough to apply to film as a particular kind of cultural production.

In response to this critique, I want to open up the concept of procedural publicness through a rereading Benjamin's theory of experience. Contrary to Habermas's original formulation, the utopian critical potentials embedded in the public sphere are not necessarily eradicated with new forms of communication such as film, but the potential for creating and exploiting a publicness among film audiences changes. Benjamin's concept of experience can be read to suggest this same process, if without the explicit commitment

to a concept of procedural publicness.

In his most well known essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility", Benjamin grasped that the development of film allowed for a partial freeing up of the appropriation of cultural meaning from the confines of a specific tradition (1968). As part of the explosion of mechanically reproducible media in the twentieth century, film furthers the breakdown of more traditional spatial-temporal relations which defined the *aura* of older art forms. This not only alters the kinds of meaning circulated through film but also the way aesthetic experience is received by audiences. On the one hand, Benjamin argues that the breakdown of spatial/temporal boundaries which contain the meaning associated with an art form opens up the possibility that film as art will no longer be involved in people's lives in a ritualistic fashion, based either in an embedded tradition or in the myth of the genius artist. Film "was the first 'art form' that essentially managed to dispense with the artist in having shifted the locus of the work as a manifestation of an individual creation to within a collective system of production/distribution/consumption" (Dorland 1988, 317). On the other hand, film's ability to circulate cultural meanings among large audiences creates the possibility for audiences to rework the meanings of a film within the context of their own lives. The emancipatory potential of film can thus be read in terms of the potential politicization of the art form which takes place through the historical uses audiences make of films.

The theory of art which underlies this description of film and the possibilities for its politicization was of course what so clearly set off Benjamin from his friend, Adorno. For Benjamin, in order to describe the nature of the changing aesthetic experience that

film constituted it is necessary to view that experience from inside the transformation of the art form itself (Habermas 1979). Only from the point of view of an immanent critique that casts its view towards the fundamental transformation occurring in the nature of aesthetic experience itself is it then possible to understand any remaining opportunities for emancipatory practice still left open in capitalist societies. Michael Dorland describes well the implications of this for film:

> If cinema was the art-form that aestheticized the social roboticization of man, it also, as Benjamin suggested, dialectically implied the ethicization of the social. For the cinema system in articulating simultaneously an aesthetic politic (the masses are beautiful) and a political aesthetic (the romance of technology) itself could never be a genuine (ethical) politics, only its simulacrum: that is to say, an imposture (Dorland 1987, 317).

If film as a site of emancipation on its own is an imposture for Benjamin, it still leaves open the possibility that audiences might be able to rework images in their own context and in this way politicize their lives.

Benjamin suggests that film is at its most powerful when it creates the illusions of wholeness, presence, and coherence for a world only ever experienced in its fragments. What is most powerful about film's ability to create this sense of wholeness is the unconscious world it thereby brings together. Fredric Jameson's efforts to link Freud to Benjamin are helpful here. Jameson writes:

> For Freud, the function of consciousness is the defense of the organism against shocks from the external environment ... [T]raumas, hysterical repetitions, dreams are ways in which the incompletely assimilated shock attempts to make its way through to consciousness and hence to ultimate appeasement. In Benjamin's hands, this idea becomes an instrument of historical description, a way of showing how in modern society, perhaps on account of the increasing number of shocks of all kinds ... these defense mechanisms are no longer personal ones: a whole series of mechanical substitutes intervene between

consciousness and its objects, shielding us perhaps (Jameson 1971, 63). Jameson goes on to suggest that to the extent that mechanical substitutes such as film shield us from the traumas and hysterical repetitions of daily life, they also deprive us of ways of "assimilating what happens to us or of transforming our sensations into ... genuinely personal experiences" (Jameson 1971, 63). The point however is to develop new forms of perception which redeem the moments of appeasement even in the face of a transformed and deprived experience filtered
hrough visual representations of our worlds. For Benjamin the method to redeem moments of authentic experience from narrative film is allegory.

Allegory is implicit in the very mechanical nature of film. Film cuts across space, tying together and creating worlds never before seen. "For the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical, perception the film has brought about a ... deepening of apperception" (Benjamin 1968, 235). Because of this the narrative and visual images present in the film have to be understood within and as part of a larger historical context in order for their meaning to be grasped. "Allegories are in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things" writes Benjamin (qtd. in Jameson 1971, 71). They are the fragments, the points of reconciliation and understanding that exist in the seams of a film as a phenomenal object. Reading a film in this way does not aim merely to pick up symbols from the screen reflected from what today we call, the larger historical referents. Allegorical readings operate by revealing a hopeful and authentic experience beneath a film's attempt to rework historical referents. Social relationships of class, region, and gender etc. are thus experienced anew as they are represented in film. Allegorical

readings begin with the raw material of new film representations: the point then is to explore how these representations become fecund, and point towards a reconciliation of current social relationships.

Allegory as an interpretive method is summarized through Benjamin's metaphor, "the optical unconscious"[9]. Drawn from Benjamin's primary concern for the preservation of memory, the optical unconscious operates as a fundamentally revolutionary practice in the context of a capitalist and bureaucratic system which threatens the very possibility and legitimacy of personal and collective memories about work, leisure and place. The optical unconscious "emphasizes the fragmenting, destructive ... effect of cinematic devices" but also the hopefulness lying beneath the camera's ability to draw an illusion across our worlds (Hansen 1987, 209). In the "Work of Art" essay Benjamin locates the effect of these devices through the metaphor of the surgeon: s/he "diminishes the distance between [her/]himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body" (Benjamin 1968, 233).

> By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera/[scalpel], the film/[surgeon], on the one hand extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, [they manage] to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action (Benjamin 1968, 236).

The surgeon and the apparatus of the film thus penetrate a "naturalized" landscape of social relationships, and thereby disengage those relationships from the immediate

---

[9] Miriam Hansen points out that Benjamin first introduces the metaphor of "the optical unconscious" in his 1931 essay, "A Short History of Photography" (Hansen 1987, 207). In the "Work of Art" essay Benjamin does not use this term explicitly but comments, instead, on the "unconscious optics" opened up by the camera (Benjamin 1968, 236-237).

historical conditions in which they develop. In disengaging social relationships of the body, of class, of gender, or of region from their unacknowledged historical conditions, film also opens up an unanticipated opportunity to explore the possibility of more authentic forms of human experience. Allegory and the optical unconscious are implicit to the workings of the apparatus of cinema itself, in the way the apparatus naturalizes landscapes and social relationships created in film. The camera cuts "through the tissue of reality" and gives that reality an appearance of wholeness. This is the very moment at which allegory becomes the defining trope to pursue the hope of authentic experience in film. In the next chapter I develop these methodological considerations into an analysis of how public spheres are constituted and politicized in relation to William MacGillivray's *Life Classes*. However, at this point I want to direct our attention back to the procedural public sphere by rereading the concept of experience underlying Benjamin's discussion of film. This step expands the notion of publicness to make it relevant to film.

Habermas once described Benjamin's theory of art as a theory of experience[10]. One way to make sense of this claim is to say that Benjamin's descriptions of how the work of art is transformed through technologies like photography and film, at least in part depend upon a separation of aesthetic practice as an independent sphere of activity. The history through which aesthetic practice is institutionalized and separated off from other spheres of activity within modernity is much more complex than can be developed here. But as Habermas described in his early analysis of the bourgeois concept of the public

---

[10] For a more recent example of this sentiment, see Kelly and Lord 1994.

sphere, once an independent art market is created in bourgeois society, aesthetic practice comes to be separated off as a sphere of activity from acts based on utility or the desire for normative agreement (Habermas 1992; but also see 1985b, 199). Secularized art comes to be occupied with the fragmentation and decentering of previously accepted moral, cognitive and personal boundaries. It is not, however, occupied with the problematic nature of these boundaries through their direct critique. Rather it is through the pursuit of a hoped-for sensuous immediacy that art holds forth to a mediated critique of our everyday lives. Albrect Wellmer describes this conceptual separation between modern secularized art and the pragmatic pursuits of a coherent, rational understanding of the world: "In art, truth becomes manifest in the sensual domain" (Wellmer 1991, 6). It is manifest as immediate experience, as "a form of mimesis that has become spiritualized; that is, it has become transformed and objectified by rationality" (Wellmer 1991, 4-5). To the extent that aesthetic experience is about the critique of false unities, the pursuit of the Beautiful and the Sublime only allows for a mediated relationship and critique of cognitive, normative, and personal boundaries.

Benjamin is not always clear on how he conceives of the nature of experience to be redeemed from a differentiated sphere of aesthetic practice. In large part, Benjamin's talk of humanity's mimetic faculties gets us closest to the kind of experience to be redeemed through the translation of art into everyday life. Mimesis is the capacity to produce resemblances, the "compulsion ... to become and behave like something else" (Benjamin 1986, 333). While fundamentally historical, humanity's mimetic faculties contain and operate through a basic desire to create similarities between ourselves and the

natural world, between ourselves and those around us, and between ourselves and our own bodies. The experience to be retained through mimesis is one of fullness, much alike "the magical correspondences and analogies" that historically would have been the terrain of the shaman, the magician and the priest (Benjamin 1986, 330). Experience is the possibility, always and increasingly threatened by transformation and decay, that we might have in our midst "the unheard-of, the unprecedented, the height of bliss" but also "the other, the eternal repetition, the restoration of the original, the first happiness" (Benjamin 1969, 204). To the extent that such experiences are contained in art a dialectic of happiness is tied to both the lure of an unknown future and a vaguely recalled past.

Even from these descriptions of the experience contained in art, a barely concealed mythic and theological strain seems to haunt Benjamin's theory of experience. The art object defined in this light points towards a sense of unity and authenticity between subject and object, but this unity appears defined by a ritual of oneness and return that requires a metaphysical faith. As Habermas noted, Benjamin hoped to replace that faith with "a state of affairs in which the esoteric experience of happiness [in art] has become public and universal" (Habermas 1979, 46). In his later work, Benjamin turned to historical materialism in the hope that Marx's concerns for a potentially revolutionary proletariat would allow for a materialist reworking of mimetic experience on earth. Benjamin hoped Marx's theory of history would provide a materialist explanation for the experience of excess contained in art as well as a theory of the revolutionary subject (the proletariat) who would be historically situated to translate the redemptive potential within art back into everyday life. But on two fronts this move failed. As Habermas has noted,

even if Marx did not conceive of economic activity as the sole determinant of other spheres of activity, historical materialism is at a loss to describe a mediated relationship between aesthetic experience and economic life (Habermas 1979; but also see Jay 1985, 132-133). As a result, the turn to historical materialism tends to collapse experience in art into the economic relations of production[11]. The second problem results directly from the first. If the mimetic hopefulness of art is limited to only one sphere of activity, this instigates a too hasty identification of the pursuits of art with the lives of the proletariat. And so art, no longer a separate sphere of practice, comes to be defined by its ability to speak directly to the working class.

Caught in this dilemma, I suggest that another route to extract Benjamin's theory of experience from its debt to theology and historical myth is to conceive of mimetic experience in art in terms of a potential for emancipatory insight that is only redeemed when meaning in art is reclaimed in the context of our everyday lives. In this light, in a special sense, the meaning of aesthetic experience is dependent upon the critical potentials born out in the procedural model of the public sphere. Benjamin interpreted the mimetic potential in art as an immediate and blissful oneness between ourselves, our bodies and the natural world. With the development of film and photography the potential for this kind of immediacy is dissolved from the work of art itself; redemptive moments in film depend upon the work audiences do to extract insights from film and thereby politicize art in the context of their everyday lives. However, the mimetic energy underlying this process still

---

[11] For signs of this collapse, and Benjamin's own struggles to overcome simplistic analogies between the work of the artist and class struggle, see Benjamin 1986.

comes from the flashes of insight which an original and, in part, metaphysical aesthetic experience seemed to offer, even if this insight is transposed over to the interpretive energies of audiences. The route I am suggesting is slightly different. It relies on the potential for emancipatory activity characteristic of the procedural public sphere.

The procedural concept of the public sphere describes a potential for emancipatory practice based on the formal structures implicit in the everyday use of language. The critical emancipatory energies within this structure cannot of course be simply imposed in the fashion of a one-to-one correspondence onto the nature of aesthetic experience. But, if the relationship between the emancipatory potentials implicit in the procedural model of the public sphere are conceived in a metaphoric relation to the nature of meaning generated in art, it is possible to maintain aesthetic experience as a separate sphere of activity, while still tying the claims invested in art to a mediated relationship with everyday life.

Art is about the self becoming decentred from its "normal categorical grasp" of the world (Habermas 1985, 201). This process of decentering occurs at the level of sensuous immediacy. To become meaningful, however, this immediacy requires a level of rational, pragmatic interpretation to be redeemed. Aesthetic experience does not collapse into or simply become a reflection of what we normally think of as the pragmatic use of language. As Habermas suggests, aesthetic experience creates possibilities for

> an openness to the expurgated elements of the unconscious, the fantastic, and the mad, the material and the bodily - thus to everything in our speechless contact with reality which is so fleeting, so contingent, so immediate, so individualized, simultaneously so far and so near that it escapes our normal categorical grasp (Habermas 1985b, 201).

But to gain access to the way art uncovers what was previously speechless requires that art be translated back into everyday life. I suggest that it is through the work of various publics drawing on the emancipatory energies outlined in the procedural concept of the public sphere that art becomes fully meaningful at all. Even if art, as a symbolic act aiming towards sensuous immediacy, remains a separate sphere of activity[12], the very possibility that this activity is meaningful depends on the non-metaphoric translation of art's meaning into everyday life. With this move, the kind of experience to be redeemed in Benjamin's theory of art can thus be translated over from his theological grounding to the possible meaningful interpretations which various publics could make of art. Even more, this move allows us to expand talk about publicness in relation to film.

If metaphor describes the relationship of avant-garde art to everyday life, any attempt to reclaim the critique of moral, cognitive and subjective boundaries can't be envisioned in the form of a one-to-one correspondence between art and everyday life. But this was how our earlier outline of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere articulated the relationship between art and everyday experiences. To take only one example, Habermas defined the development of a critical, rational publicness in part through the particular subjectivity created by the novel and the culture-debating publics that existed in

---

[12] I want to be clear here about my qualification of art as a separate sphere of activity. Aesthetic practice is contingent upon the social, political and aesthetic conditions in which it is created, and in this sense is not, strictly speaking, separate from the systems of economic, social and cultural domination that exist in our society. However, aesthetic practice anticipates a much more complete and full sense of wholeness in our lives, and in this sense, refers to, even if only through negation, a distinct and separate sphere from our immediate reality.

eighteenth century French salons. The concept of publicness is then limited to only that form of critical rational publicness. If aesthetic practice is envisioned as a separate sphere of activity which only relates in metaphoric fashion to moral, cognitive and subjective forms of life, however, the potential relationship of procedural publicness to cultural productions such as film can be conceived more broadly. It exists at those moments when the metaphoric meanings in aesthetic experiences such as film are translated and reclaimed by audiences in the context of their own lives, or when critics of cultural productions can provide good reasons for the possibility of such a critical reclamation. With this move it is possible to talk of publicness as a second-order activity that potentially arises in the relationship between audiences and film.

Earlier I suggested that Laura Marks's notion of performance could be anchored in the notion of a procedural public sphere by describing the performative as those moments in Canadian films when the status and nature of taken-for-granted social relationships are cast in doubt for particular audiences. To describe publicness as a second-order activity existing between audiences and film clarifies this relationship. Canadian films are not public spheres in the traditional sense of a place where rational, pragmatic debate over moral, cognitive and subjective concerns takes place. Publicness relates to Canadian film as a process that is opened up given the particular contexts in which Canadian films are produced, distributed and consumed. Performative moments in texts invite audiences to question social relationships of class, gender or region, by placing in question the ability of the film text to comment on these relationships. But this is only one part of the process. To talk of films as performative in terms of a public sphere includes identifying

how and why certain communities are being addressed by a film, or addressing how audiences have used a film text to work out different responses to relationships of class, gender, or region. In short, performance in the film text is anchored by the possibility that a public can be identified in relation to those moments of uncertainty and ambiguity present in the text. The dialectic of experience which Benjamin traces through film suggests a method for locating the possibilities of publicness raised in a recent independent Canadian film.

Chapter III:
Public Screens/ Public Spectatorship —
William MacGillivray's Life Classes

> [T]he history of film contains a utopian strain - which is what accounts for the attraction of the cinema - but it is a utopia which contrary to the Greek meaning of *ou-topos* = no place, is in existence everywhere and especially in the unsophisticated imagination. This unsophisticated imagination, however, is buried under a thick layer of cultural garbage. It has to be dug out. This project of excavation, not at all a utopian notion, can be realized only through our work.
>
> Alexander Kluge, filmmaker.

> Canadians' relation to media culture is different. There have been public TV and public radio here for longer than in the U.S. We've been able to use and to trust the image a little more. Maybe Canadians have been less willing to buy into the notion that media constructs reality totally and insisted on placing media in an instrumental relationship to other forms of resistance.
>
> Sara Diamond, video/filmmaker.

Life Classes begins with what Marks' calls, a "performative moment". Although the film largely tells the story of a woman's journey to self-discovery, it begins by casting doubt on the very ability of narrative film to bring spectators into stories. The haunting voice of a folk singer lurks over a black screen until the film's initial images are revealed by a camera dollying in slow motion through the inner world of a shopping mall. The camera pans past a neglected fiddler busking for change; it sweeps past storefronts revealing the seemingly lost consumers making their way through the mall's corridors. As the camera's movement shifts, it turns and focuses in on a wall of televisions set up before a store in the midst of a liquidation sale. A face awaits us on the screen. A voice-over intrudes from the t.v. to tell viewers that the newscast will be linking up directly with Jacinta Cormier, star of *Life Classes*, a new feature film from Nova Scotia. The camera

continues to move toward the t.v. screen until the t.v. and film screens become parallel although never entirely one. Jacinta Cormier begins to tell us about her own connections to her character, Mary Cameron, until finally, the picture shifts from the interview to the narrative of the film. Jacinta's voice does not immediately dissolve once the narrative begins but helps to blend the world of documentary-interview to the world of narrative filmmaking. The story of Mary Cameron begins but this opening sequence never lets us forget that we, as spectators, are watching a film clearly aware of its own existence as a cinematic object.

The interview with Jacinta Cormier in part explains the power of the opening sequence, but this power also exists because of the beauty of the searching camera dollying past shoppers. A film which opens with a sequence that immediately tells spectators to be aware that they will be watching a movie cannot but be troubling; at the very least it undermines the guise of naturalism which most narrative (and particularly Hollywood feature) films offer to spectators. But what makes the interview with Jacinta Cormier more interesting are the moments which precede it. The softness of the film's opening shots, the camera's haulting pace and the folk song[1] paying homage to the generational continuities tying women together combine to create the facade of a dream. The pace and texture of these images doesn't suggest that the world we are seeing exists

---

[1] Throughout the film a song reminds audiences of the connections tying Mary Cameron to her mother, and her mother before her: My child is my mother returning,
Her mother, my daughter the same.
She carries us all in her yearning,
Our sorrow, our peace and our pain.

in our immediate reality; it exists somewhere else, perhaps in our memory. The opening sequences pay homage to a world that exists through the metaphors of the fiddler, the folk song, and an elderly couple waiting patiently in the mall for someone to arrive. But because this regional world is presented in slow motion, the film invites us to look closely at the passing scenes, to pay homage to this world, to hear what the people have to say, but also to allow that this world is slowly slipping away.

If this is the effect of the opening sequence, the interview with Jacinta Cormier certainly disturbs our early immersion in the film, but not so as to undermine entirely the significance of the story about to unfold. The interview warns spectators not to fall into the trap of believing that this film is equivalent to a real woman's journey towards self-discovery. The image as a straightforward depiction of the world is made untrustworthy but only so that we will think about our involvement in the film in other ways. This formalistic interruption does not put into question the power of the film to reflect on social relationships altogether. Rather, because it comes after the opening moments of the film, the interview with Jacinta Cormier asks spectators to engage two processes at once: on the one hand, never forget that you are watching a film produced in a particular place and time; on the other hand, know that film can still be used to excavate lost memories if only to recall their presence and their passing. It is this dialectic that runs throughout the film. Recalling the remarks of Alexander Kluge and Sara Diamond, this dialectic opens utopian strains in *Life Classes* which develop in part because the film is unwilling simply to abandon the power of the image; rather the image is placed in a "relationship to other forms of [social] resistance" (Diamond qtd. in Marks 1993, 18). At the end of the last

chapter I noted that it is not possible to think of independent Canadian narrative film in terms of traditional public spheres where rational, pragmatic debate over moral, cognitive and subjective concerns take place. The utopian work of *Life Classes* recognizes this fact. How then utopian strains work through *Life Classes* and how it is we can talk about such strains in terms of the development of public spheres are the concerns which I address in this chapter.

Life Classes tells a number of stories at once. Primarily it is the story of Mary Cameron, a woman trapped by the limitations of her home in Cape Breton. She has been made pregnant by local ex-bootlegger Earl (Leon Dubrinsky), and although he suggests she get rid of the baby, Mary decides to keep the child and leave Cape Breton. Mary moves to Halifax where we encounter her two years later now caring for her baby girl, Marie, and doing her best to make ends meet. Through a friend Mary meets at her job as a department store clerk, she is offered the chance to make much needed extra cash posing nude for an art class at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). Early on in the film, Mary is shown completing kitschy paint-by number landscapes of Cape Breton. She quickly uses her experience from NSCAD however, to begin doing her own sketches, first of Marie, and later of Earl. By the end of the film Mary's artistic vision has grown enough to allow her to mount her own one-woman show.

The transition in Mary's art practice from what Peter Harcourt calls Mary, "the passive object" to a Mary "who is beginning to take charge" accounts on one level for the affirmative message in the film (Harcourt 1987, 20). Mary Cameron's story is the story of a woman who "wins small", she starts off trapped by the limitations of her home town,

and the limited experiences of art she has access to, and becomes an artist in her own right supporting a child along the way (MacGillivray qtd. in Harcourt 1987, 17). Thematically, *Life Classes* is about the self-actualization of an artist, the roadblocks she faces, her resilience, and eventual success. But if the opening sequences of the film are any indication, the film is also about filmic representation, memory, regionalism and gender. These issues are addressed to various alternative publics and not always so clearly in terms of the film's narrative preoccupations. In this chapter I look at how *Life Classes* opens up questions and concerns for audiences not typically addressed in the traditional public sphere. I want to start by expanding the categories of the public sphere to contextualize and describe the kinds of address this film makes to various audiences.

If publicness is a second-order activity created after the fact of film production, Oskar Negt's and Alexander Kluge's notions of production public spheres and alternative public spheres help to reframe Benjamin's dialectical account of film in terms of a public sphere debate. Negt and Kluge write in the tradition of Habermas' early analysis of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere, but their notions begin from more explicitly political preoccupations - "whether and to what extent a public sphere is organized from above — by the exclusive standards of high culture or the stereotypes of commodity culture — or by the experiencing subjects ... on the basis of their context of living" (Hansen 1991, 12). Their focus on the opportunities for, and the characteristics of participation by various social groups in public spheres constitutes an explicitly political reading of public spheres that ties directly into the work of *Life Classes*.

As a category, public spheres of production correspond to Benjamin's attempts to understand film as part of various systems of production. Benjamin argued that with the development of mechanically reproduced media such as film, aesthetic practice on its own can only be a pretence to emancipatory activity. Film is part of various economic, mechanical and psychoanalytic systems of production which require that films be reworked back into the lives of spectators. Production public spheres are meant to delineate these systemic elements of the industrial-commercial mass media, in particular, their position within a capitalist market place (Negt and Kluge 1988, 71; but also see Hansen 1993, 200)[2]. Because production public spheres are firmly entrenched within the workings of the marketplace they occupy an ambiguous space. They depend on the maximum inclusion of an audience within the market to whom they appeal. At the same time, they also tend to aim towards the kinds of legitimacy which has historically been aligned with "the institutions of parliamentary representation and the state"; that is, with the institutions of the classic public sphere (Hansen 1993, 200). Of course, film does not aim towards this legitimacy in the same fashion as, say, televised news reports, where the broadcast and its reception are still mistakenly regarded as acts of legitimacy, reminiscent of public debate (Morse 1986). But in its early development, film did aspire to bourgeois

---

[2] Hansen also includes in the category of production public spheres such diverse institutional structures as "corporate public relations, ... spaces of commerce and consumption" along with communities in one-industry factory towns (Hansen 1993, 200). These structures need not concern us here.

traits of cultural legitimacy in order to establish the cultural respectability of the cinema[3]. And today, even if film is not generally aligned with institutions of the bourgeois public sphere, the recent questioning of Pierre Falardeau's *Octobre* (1994) suggests that films, particularly those which dramatize historical events, still recall truth claims reminiscent of the bourgeois public sphere[4]. Production public spheres extend the substance of what is considered public beyond the institutions and concepts of the classical public sphere; "production public spheres are a direct expression of the domain of production" but their impact on social experience extends specific claims to legitimacy beyond their role as a means for profitable production (Negt and Kluge 1988, 72).

---

[3] In particular, controlling noisy outbursts and other forms of overt participation by audience members at the reception of early Hollywood films was used to increase the presence of women at the cinema following 1907. At the time, drawing more women to the cinema was an explicit technique in the legitimation of film (Hansen 1991, 38-40).

In Canada, as I suggested in the introduction, John Grierson's NFB created two prestige film series during World War II – *Canada Carries On* and *World in Action* – which contributed to the public – in the traditional sense of a bourgeois public sphere – legitimacy of film. Both film series "were intended to articulate Canada's role in the war effort and its place in international geopolitics" and in this way to educate Canadian and Allied publics through film (Nelson 1988, 64).

[4] For an overview of some of the debate over Falardeau's film before it received funding from Telefilm Canada and the NFB, see: Johnson 1993, B3; "A legitimate public debate" 1993, B2; Gigantes 1993, B3; Falardeau 1993, B3; and Johnson 1993b, B5. For a review of some of the issues raised after *Octobre* was released, see Alioff 1994.

For Negt and Kluge, as with Benjamin, the material for production public spheres such as film is drawn from the life context of the various audiences they are appealing to. Film, of course, actively reworks this life context but it is still dependent on historical changes in social relationships to provide a film's "raw material" (Hansen 1991, 200-201). Negt and Kluge describe this movement when they write that areas of human life previously bracketed from representation are "acknowledged insofar as [they fit] in with the realization of capital's interest in exploitation"; capital "accommodates itself to real needs, but must simultaneously model all real needs so that it can slot them into its abstract system" of exchange value (Negt and Kluge 1988, 75). In their dependence on the market, public spheres of production are never entirely separate from the life contexts they at the same time reorganize through particular forms of cultural production. Public spheres of production provide "a horizon of experience", a public horizon not entirely distinct from the life contexts of its audiences but which, in extracting the experience of different groups from their life context, frames that experience in new ways.

Negt's and Kluge's description of a second category of public spheres is meant to identify the place of different audiences or publics in relation to film. Much like Benjamin's preoccupations with how lost histories and memories reappear in films, alternative public spheres identify relationships of negation present even as alternative communities are represented in public spheres of production. Originally Negt and Kluge identified alternative public spheres with the epithet "proletarian" (Hansen 1993, 201-205; but also see Kluge 1981/82, 212-214). Since their early work, however, "proletarian" has been abandoned and replaced by the much less explicitly Marxist concept, "alternative

publics". Alternative is meant to be interpreted as a relational category but without the epistemological baggage surrounding the privileging of labouring activity accorded even philosophical readings of Marxist terms. Not entirely disregarding the Marxian critique of capitalist production, the idea of alternative here is much more closely aligned with the elements of publicness developed in Habermas' work and what I call the concept of a procedural public sphere. As a relational category it refers to groups and social relationships excluded from the traditional spheres of public life, as well as to those potentials to develop new forms of political organization and representation (Hansen 1993, 202). Alternative public spheres can be identified in the spaces where they intrude upon dominant public spheres of production, but also in the way they represent new forms of public life and organization which extend beyond the traditional institutions of bourgeois democracy (ie: party politics and participation in parliamentary institutions). As Kluge notes in talking about film, this sense of alternative public spheres is still very much concerned with the conditions effecting "the production of a public sphere" (Kluge 1981/82, 213). The place of alternative publics in production public spheres is directly concerned with "a claim to legitimacy" developed in terms of public debate (Kluge 1981/82, 213). Alternative public spheres are "in this sense, what one might call the [factories] of politics - its [sites] of production" (Kluge 1981/82, 213).

If production public spheres and alternative public spheres are two sides of a dialectical encounter taking place in film, the kind of publicness described in the procedural concept of the public sphere can be thought of as the results of this encounter. The potential to create open, mutual and inclusive understandings exists in those aleatory

moments that are experienced or can be described after the fact of film production, distribution and consumption. In this light, the procedural notion of publicness is not simply a schema used to describe the dialectic encounter between social struggles over class, gender or region in Canada, and the representation of these relationships in film. Procedural public spheres identify what was referred to in the previous chapter as the potential for public spheres to exist in the often unrecognized places where the political articulation of issues develops. Such struggles and debates are not regulated by a specific institutionalized type of discourse, except those warranties of openness, mutuality, and communicative interaction which allow the struggles and debates to take shape in the first place. Any warranties of publicness are read in the effects which filmic mediations have on social struggles.

To frame the ongoing relationship between public spheres of production and alternative publics, Kluge offers the trope, *the film in the spectator's head.* This trope condenses the relationship between film as a production public sphere and alternative public spheres in terms of the circulation of meaning between film and audiences (Kluge 1981/82, 210-211; but also see Hansen 1991, 12-13). The film in the spectator's head describes the process in which authentic experience can be read in the fragments and seams of films. A notion of the film spectator is obviously included in this trope, but the spectator referred to here is a much different beast than that developed in other traditions of spectator analysis, including the tradition of semiotic and psychoanalytic film theory developed over the 1970's and 1980's.

This latter tradition draws on a Lacanian/Althusserian notion of the Subject and leads to readings of the spectator solely in terms of processes of psychanalytic identifications circulated through the filmic registers of narrative and image. As discussed in the work of Christian Metz and Stephen Heath, the spectator created in narrative cinema thus becomes the site of an "imaginary coherence and omnipotence" organized by a dialectic of voyeuristic pleasures present on the screen but absent from the real lives of audience members (Hansen 1991, 81-82). The result of this imaginary coherence is that the spectator in much narrative cinema reproduces an illusory form of transcendental subjectivity which undermines any critical forms of cultural intervention in narrative cinema (Hansen 1991, 81). Rather, most narrative texts are understood to constitute a closed relationship between the film and spectators that allows little room for alternative publics to proffer divergent interpretations of the film.

Of late, questions have arisen over the inadequacy of this category of spectatorship to deal with questions of history in film: on the one hand, issues of historical contingency surrounding the way spectators are cinematically positioned during different historical periods of film production tend to be ignored; and on the other hand, the multifarious responses of so-called empirical audiences, separated by differences of class, race, or region also tend to be left underdeveloped[5]. In all, because this concept tends to privilege

---

[5] For a useful summary of questions raised around the place of history in semiotic/psychoanalytic analyses of film, see Nichols 1985. As well see the special issue of *Camera Obscura* on the female spectator in which Janet Bergstom's and Mary Ann Doane's introduction as well as many of the commentaries that follow, question the role of history in the discussion of female spectatorship (1989).

the role of the text in determining processes of pleasurable identification, it fails to adequately locate these processes in an historical context.

By contrast, the spectator underlying Kluge's trope, the film in the spectator's head, opens up opportunities to examine historical questions in the text while at the same time examining how the text tries to structure responses amongst audiences. As Hansen suggests, "the reciprocity between the film on the screen and the spectator's stream of associations becomes the measure of a particular film's use value for an alternative public sphere: a film either exploits the viewer's needs, perceptions and wishes or it encourages their autonomous movement, fine-tuning and reliance" (Hansen 1991, 13). To the extent that films promote the latter they could be described as creating potential procedural public spheres. I want to argue that *Life Classes* is an example of a film that creates such possibilities. It is not a revolutionary film fundamentally challenging the social relationships it explores, but it nonetheless opens spaces where various alternative publics can create a performative ambiguity over relationships of region, memory, class and gender. These performative ambiguities invite a participatory reflexiveness for audiences normally excluded from the public sphere.

Although the economics of production and distribution usually place narrative cinema in the position of a production public sphere, assigning *Life Classes* this status is difficult to begin with because Canadian narrative cinema has never been a fully developed industrial form. The history of Canadian narrative cinema is locked up in a continuous struggle to develop an indigenous feature film industry at all. Pendakur has recently traced the important history lying behind the marginalization of the Canadian film

industry (1990). His analysis of the political economy underlying Hollywood's control of film distribution networks in Canada, along with the continued failure of the Canadian state to take appropriate actions to assist in the development of an indigenous feature film industry in part explains why Canadian cinema regularly holds but 2-3% of screen time across the country. Film is industrial and part of a production public sphere, but in English Canada the economic systems of production and distribution for film have always been in some sense "alternative", struggling against the control and domination of the Canadian market by Hollywood cinema: "With the integration of American capital into the Canadian economy, the imperial relation is secured and maintained more fundamentally within the ... mass media" than in any other sphere (Pendakur 1990, 34). The structure of the Canadian film industry contains a number of implications for *Life Classes*. This structure doesn't create a one-to-one address to alternative communities, but its marginalized status materializes in elements of the film, and this opens up moments of address to certain alternative communities. Such address creates aleatory moments of inclusion and understanding in *Life Classes* that are part of the development of procedural public spheres.

The fact that William MacGillivray, a Newfoundlander himself, is making films in the Maritimes about the issues and stories important to that region already seems an act of resistance meant to appeal to a community of people and a local history not often addressed in film. This act of resistance becomes apparent in some of the issues explored in the film, but here I'm simply concerned with the process of putting Maritime stories on the screen. While English-Canadian feature film-making generally is marginalized, the

Maritimes is a marginalized regional culture within a national culture already struggling to assert independent stories and perspectives about our world. MacGillivray says as much when he notes that to make films in Atlantic Canada is already to "work outside the mainstream": "Not everybody is going to agree with" the stories we tell about the Maritimes, "not everybody is going to like them, some people might find them boring, some people might find them obscure — but nonetheless they are our concerns" (qtd. in Senchuk 1983, I-29). In this sense they are important to tell, not the least because the desire to depict regional concerns in Canada already refers to a community of people whose stories and histories are rarely told on the screen. As MacGillivray notes about the difficulty of keeping a name for his work in Toronto while producing films in Halifax, "if you're not in the centre, they don't think of you"[6].

An address to alternative communities in *Life Classes* is revealed as well in the choice of actors who play two of the film's main characters. Mary Cameron is played by Jacinta Cormier and while she is perhaps unknown to audiences outside of the Maritimes, "in the small pond that is Newfoundland, [she] is one of the big fish" (Warren 1988, 19). Cormier has been a popular singer in Newfoundland for fifteen years and shortly after the release of *Life Classes* was given her own "CBC-TV local variety show called *Jacinta*" (Warren 1988, 19). Earl the ex-bootlegger and father to Mary's child is also played by a local celebrity: "freewheeling vocalist, composer, musician (founder of the legendary band, *Buddy and the Boys*) and Cape Breton native Leon Dubinsky" (Majka 1986, 4). The fact

---

[6] William MacGillivray, telephone interview, 18 November 1994.

that *Life Classes* uses people known to Maritime audiences opens up a possible identity for the film, an identity framed by the familiarity of having one's own people tell stories about their world.

Life Classes had an acclaimed reception among film critics and audiences on the film festival circuit across Canada when it was released in 1987[7]. And while the popular reception for the film was not as good as the producers hoped, it continues to draw audiences at local repertory theatres in Nova Scotia, and remains one of the most popular videos rented in local video stores in Halifax[8]. All of this suggests that because *Life Classes* relies on celebrities familiar to Maritime communities, the story of Mary Cameron's struggle to succeed opens up an address to alternative audiences. As a narrative film, *Life Classes* remains part of a production public sphere, but the conditions under which it was produced and distributed imply that on one level it addresses an alternative public sphere from the start. The use of local talent to tell local stories refers to audiences historically excluded from representation on film, thereby creating moments which allow for identification and dialogue for marginalized communities.

But of course there are also other ways in which a dialogue with audiences is opened up in *Life Classes*. Paradoxically, the film is able to sustain this dialogue because, from the start it recognizes that as an image-based cultural production, it is part of a

---

[7] For a glowing review of the film during Toronto's *Festival of Festivals*, see Wintonick 1987. For more local reflections on the success of the film, see Warren 1988.

[8] William MacGillivray, telephone interview, 18 November 1994.

production public sphere, even if the conditions under which it was produced and distributed are marginal cultural practices in Canada. The film's opening scenes are an early indication of how it undertakes this paradoxical task.

Life Classes reminds audiences at the outset not to substitute the story in the film for the real story of a woman's life. The interview with Jacinta Cormier acts as a performative interruption in the film's narrative, calling on the audience to be subjects in the discourse of the film text, rather than what Laura Marks called "objects" of reception (Marks 1993, 17). The struggle against the uncritical absorption of spectators into the film remains a key theme in much Canadian filmmaking. Bruce Elder has argued as much, and suggested that while film as a photographically-based medium contains the potential to simulate and in a sense replace reality, the tradition of focusing on the materiality of the film apparatus within Canadian (and particularly experimental) filmmaking opens up possibilities to use representation in meaningful ways (Elder 1989, 270-281; but also see McLarty 1990). To interrupt the process by which film simulates reality can curtail the systemic power of the image to act as a substitute for reality. In *Life Classes* the critique of film as a form of systemic representation combines with a subsequent embrace with narrative representation to create spaces where a sense of openness can be created over the passions and concerns of diverse spectators.

In part the kind of dialogue opened up with spectators is, as I suggested at the outset of this chapter, limited to what is being socially and culturally lost to the world depicted in *Life Classes*. The film's status as a narrative and its preoccupations with representational art enable it, in a uniquely fitting way, to interrogate temporal concerns

and historical loss. Again, Bruce Elder has noted that temporality is one of the most important resources available to filmmakers (Elder 1989). When filmmakers make visible the separation and distance between the world represented on the screen and a world existing outside of representation, they anticipate temporal markers. Questions of temporality and history become a part of the film when the immersion of spectators into the film is interrupted and we are forced to recognize the illusory nature of the cinematic object itself. Thereby the present cinematic world is separated from the historical referent absent from our view. Time and memory thus become key resources to explore in film. In *Life Classes*, one particularly revealing dynamic plays out the importance of issues of time and historical loss.

Although Mary Cameron starts out doing paint-by-number water colours, her coming-of-age story ends with her own showing of representational sketches. This struggle is juxtaposed at one point just as Mary is beginning to find her own artistic voice when she attends a lecture by a German conceptual artist at NSCAD. Although the sculptor is apparently famous, her commitment to her work is shown to be highly abstract, dispassionate and rather empty in the face of Mary's basic questions about design and craftsmanship. The satirical treatment of the German artist suggests an almost nostalgic dissent against conceptual art in *Life Classes*. But I suspect that representational art is given its day in the film because, although perhaps not entirely satisfying as an artistic practice today, the film renders this art filled with a sense of visual integrity and passion represented metaphorically in Mary's struggle to become an artist. And it is this integrity and passion that substitute for a conceptual art seemingly devoid of such commitments.

In light of this struggle, I believe *Life Classes* invites spectators to think about the loss of regional culture by using representational film clearly aware of its own processes of production. What the film suggests is not so much that a simple return or reinvention of representation will create happiness or fullness in art, or indeed adequately reveal the solutions to the struggles faced by the people and communities depicted in the film. But we need to pay homage to the stories, voices and pictures of our past that are part of a regional experience in Canada. Perhaps these experiences don't offer a sufficiently developed vision of the future for the communities they refer to, but like representational art, they can exist with passion and integrity and thus create a meaningful understanding of our recent past, a past from which a future might then be imagined. Representational art practice allows *Life Classes* to acknowledge that this world of memory, desires and dreams exists but is slowly slipping away. Film as a production public sphere thus finds ways to address the concerns of alternative communities through a rather nostalgic form of art. The hope this address contains is, I argue, reminiscent of the participatory intentions for inclusive, rational understanding defended in the procedural concept of the public sphere. Throughout the film's narrative other possibilities are also opened to explore various marginalized historical relationships, creating aleatory moments that recall a procedural public sphere.

After the opening interview with Jacinta Cormier, the first images we see in *Life Classes* are Earl's pick-up truck returning to Ingonish with a satellite dish. Earl eventually will try to set up an illegal cable service to deliver signals to the local community only to find out that attempting to control the technological arsenal of a new global

communications culture is not so easy; bureaucrats from the Canadian state, and the array of technology controlled by transnational communications companies can always succeed over the efforts of local boys. Earl finds this out later in the film when his efforts to descramble signals sent from New York and (one imagines) Los Angeles are undermined by computers that change signals ever 15 seconds. All Earl can do at this point is "just play dumb" for the officials from the CRTC, the DoC, and the DoT investigating the new breed of bootleggers. But of course the point of this struggle is that neither Earl nor the people facing the intrusion of a global culture are dumb, rather they have only a limited number of alternatives from which to control this process of intrusion and the destruction of local culture unleashed in its wake.

Laura Marks described many recent Canadian films as performative because of their ability to raise questions about taken-for-granted notions of nationhood in Canada. I believe *Life Classes* is also performative insofar as it confronts the impact of technology on local communities, and particularly how this impact could be read and appreciated by audiences facing the destruction of their own culture by the forces of an international global communications economy. What happens to Earl allegorically recalls the destruction of local culture faced by those communities at the margins of the development of global communications technology. This is a recurring theme in William MacGillivray's films as evidenced by the metaphorical struggles between local and metropolitan culture carried out in *Understanding Bliss* (1990)[9]. In Canada, the

---

[9] In *Understanding Bliss* an affair between a college professor at Memorial University and his lover, another academic but from Toronto, ultimately falls apart over their

Maritimes, even more than other regions of the country, have faced an overwhelming dislocation of local culture culminating in the recent collapse of the Atlantic Cod fisheries. In *Life Classes* such transformations are opened for debate through the struggles Earl faces to circumvent the authority of multinational capital and the Canadian state. Earl will not succeed but in his quest are the struggles of communities of people faced with changes they cannot control.

More poetically, the implications of Earl's struggle are also revealed through the quiet rhythms of the initial third of the film. In a review of MacGillivray's work, Peter Harcourt argued that the early part of *Life Classes* suffers from a sense of quiet only amplified by the slow rhythms characteristic of Mary's life before she begins doing her own sketches (Harcourt 1987, 20). He suggests that the rather halting rhythm of this early section in part could be explained by Mary's "self-preoccupation" (Harcourt 1987, 20). Mary, we are told, responds "more to the spaces" around her than she does to other characters (Harcourt 1987, 20). That Mary responds to her surrounding spaces is no doubt true, and understandable given the pathetic assistance Earl and her father offer in Mary's time of need. However I suspect there is more to the silence and halting pace of the opening sequences. Drawing on Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious, this pace also gives us a sense of the stagnation and separation that divides people in a world

---

incommensurable attachments to two very different worlds. His is a world of local culture filled with rituals and traditions threatened by the social and economic upheavals devastating Newfoundland. Hers is a world of literature, urbanity, and metropolitan cultures. She is sympathetic to his interests, but ultimately, she cannot appreciate the tempo and vicissitudes of the local culture in St.John's.

inundated with social, economic and cultural changes they are ill-prepared to deal with.

In Canadian literature, David Adams Richards achieves the same effect in the broken, awkward and simple characters he depicts from the Miramichi region of New Brunswick (Richards 1988). Just as Richards uses short, fragmented sentences to depict the separation, stagnation and divisions which haunt the lives of people on the Miramichi, I suspect the same connection between a local Maritime audience and the world depicted in *Life Classes* is at work. The quiet, haulting and poetic pace of the initial part of the film speaks to spectators familiar with a sense of chaotic change that exceeds their local abilities to control that change. In a word, the silence is loss.

In a climactic scene near the conclusion of *Life Classes*, the sense of loss is again explored, this time via the relationship of technology and locality revealed through the filter of an abstract and entirely hollow piece of performance art. Again for some extra money, Mary agrees to participate in the production of a video by a visiting New York artist. Although Mary is aware that the production will be simultaneously broadcast back to New York, she is unaware that Earl has also picked up on the satellite feed and told the folks at home to watch her on the screen. Mary performs naked for all to see and in the process reveals some dark family secrets (ie: that her father has never escaped the embarrassment of being left by his wife). In an important twist, the anonymity which the video production hoped to create for participants is collapsed. While the production was meant to allow participants to "dig" into their pasts to explore their memories virtually alone, the film suggests that this is really never possible; there is a social context to our memories and repercussions within the local histories they refer to, even if technology and

the video art which exploits that technology is not always aware of this. In this scene, the suggestion is made that: "Direct Broadcast Satellite technology threaten[s] the very existence of local culture" (Harcourt 1987, 20). Although by the end of the film Mary takes something of her own revenge against the expropriation of her cultural experience by controlling her own art practice, this climactic sequence opens up a difficult dialogue with audiences concerned with the devastation of local culture by the growth of globalized technologies.

In all these scenes, the impact of technology on local, regional cultures is allegorically explored, creating a certain openness to debate. For issues so often explored through a rhetoric of progress and the new cosmopolitan opportunities globalized technologies create, *Life Classes* intimates a different reality; globalized technology that is simply imposed on local cultures brings a great deal of harm through the bureaucratic aims and control of the state/multinational capital and little benefit for the audiences it is supposed to serve. That these issues are so rarely raised in the media suggests that *Life Classes* opens up discussion and creates the potential for aleatory responses among audiences. More importantly, film, which as a medium normally functions as part of a production public sphere becomes a public sphere of another sort, a public sphere which attempts to open a dialogue with those communities suffering the effects of global technology. How the film opens up moments reminiscent of a procedural public sphere is also explored through the avenues of response revealed in the film to the threats which technology poses to locality.

The Canadian philosopher George Grant once suggested that one way to respond to the threats which technology and globalization pose to local and regional cultures is to find ways to listen for "the intimations of deprival" that filter through cultural productions (Grant 1969, 141). The point in listening to these intimations is to pay heed to the moments when forgotten histories resurface in cultural productions, not necessarily to reinvent the world they refer to, but to recognize the historical experience they represent, and thus to invent a future from the knowledge of a cultural past. Given the concerns in *Life Classes* to recall the stories and pay homage to a world that seems to be disappearing under the weight of technological change, it's perhaps not surprising that a key means to listen for those "intimations of deprival" is memory.

Again drawing on Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious and Kluge's trope, the film in the spectator's head, memories seep through to the surface in *Life Classes* to tell stories of a cultural past still present but slipping away. Mary's landlord and friend, Mrs. Miller is an African-Canadian born and raised in Halifax. At two moments during the film she uses video recordings and photographs to tell the story of her own lost heritage. She and her family come from Africville, a black community which grew up around the rail-yards in Halifax beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. In the mid-1960's the community was forcibly removed by the provincial government for land development, leaving behind a string of broken promises and broken communities (The Africville Genealogy Society, 1992). By using video recordings and photographs to recall this history *Life Classes* does not thereby suggest that this is an historical world which we should return to, but that Africville remains an example of a history filled with unresolved

relationships. In the context of the film, video is used to recall that history for audiences and to intimate that a future cannot forget the memories represented by Africville and the experiences of its residents.

Perhaps the most powerful use of memory in *Life Classes* however, comes just after Mary's Nanny dies and Mary visits the house Nanny has left to her. Peter Harcourt has called this scene a rather odd moment of sentimentality that, in the end, seems awkward and inappropriate (Harcourt 1987, 21). I suspect, however, that the sentimentality of this scene serves well the notions of generational continuity and shared history that run throughout the film. When Mary leaves Cape Breton to have her baby and pursue a different life for herself in Halifax, she follows the same path her mother followed when she left Mary's father to pursue dreams of a life beyond the confines of a small town. In his shame, Mary's father burnt all the pictures, clothes and letters left behind by his wife, leaving Mary with only one photo of her mother. The dearth of generational continuity which these breaks represent resurface throughout the film, but it is when Mary returns to Nanny's house that the flood of memories returns most visibly.

Once inside the house, little is spoken. But the scene is replete with signs of memory. MacGillivray frequently uses disjunctions between image and sound in his films, and while this technique is not often used in *Life Classes*, voices lurk in the background in this scene while Mary wanders through the house. The effect of this disjunction combined with the softly lit lenses through which the scene is filmed creates a shroud of memories circling around Mary. Memory seems to flash like light returning Mary and spectators to a world long forgotten, but much missed. Non-diegetic voices, old children's

photographs, furniture and even a picture of Mary's mother tell of another world that inhabits this house, a world of the past that still has claims on the present. In this present Mary finds a sense of generational continuity which she will return to at the end of the film when she decides to return to Nanny's house to live with Marie.

The power of this scene lies in its ability to open moments of identification for spectators concerned with their own life experiences of lost memories. Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious and its translation by Kluge into the trope, the film in the spectator's head, highlight the possibility that different kinds of identification can be opened up in film. In this scene, at the very least, moments are created where communities concerned with the disappearance of regional memories or the memories which tie mother to daughter find common themes. And of course, because in Canada the quest for historical roots and a sense of generational continuity have long been part of our cultural heritage, the concerns for memory in *Life Classes* can only intimate the cultural anxieties created when such memories are deprived or threatened by destruction altogether.

The potential to create an identity with spectators not commonly addressed by narrative films surfaces throughout *Life Classes*. Although not noted thus far, alternative identifications are also opened to address female audiences. Again here, I find the level of address to female spectators ultimately not revolutionary, but still important. Like the attention given to relationships of region threatened by technological change, *Life Classes* largely addresses a female spectatorship by paying homage to the growing independence of a woman who is both artist and mother. But this independence is ultimately something of a small victory defined in part by the limited control Mary has at the outset of the film.

The analysis of how films address female spectators has occupied much attention over the past twenty years. In part, the analysis of female spectatorship has been pursued in terms of the semiotic and psychoanalytic category of the Subject noted earlier. Here, spectatorship is understood as a function of the gendered nature through which visual images and narrative structures are organized in much feature filmmaking. The result of these images and structures creates a "register of the look" which fundamentally excludes women from the pleasures of cinema[10]. Laura Mulvey's early paper is key to the development of this literature. Mulvey argued that narrative — and particularly classical Hollywood — films create meaning through engendered narrative and visual operations of looking. Desire, Mulvey argues, works into the narrative and visual codes of feature films to organize fetishistic and voyeuristic pleasures for a male spectator. Female spectators, in turn, are forced into positions of masochism or narcissism established through the passive exhibitionism of female characters, an exhibitionism which circulates pleasure through identification with a "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 1989a, 19). If this position is not taken up, the argument goes in Mulvey's original article, no pleasure is available to the female spectator; she is excluded, left between "the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity" (Mulvey 1989b, 30). While this argument has a bearing on the portrayal of Mary in *Life Classes*, I find psychoanalytic analyses of

---

[10] see Mulvey's now-famous essay on the female spectator, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1989a). Also see her response to issues surrounding female spectatorship which were left unaddressed in her original article (1989b).

Other key articles on the female spectator include: Doane 1982; Kaplan 1983; de Lauretis 1984; and de Lauretis 1987.

spectator relationships only partially useful. The category of the spectator underlying Mulvey's analysis relies on a notion of the Subject drawn too fully from the Lacanian/Althusserian tradition. This category needs to be historically contextualized in the contingent circumstances through which female spectators might make use of a film text.

When we first meet Mary, she is trapped by her life. With a baby on the way, an unhelpful partner and a deadend career at the family drug store, her future seems bleak. Rather than accept this future, however, Mary decides to act; she moves to Halifax to have her child and pursue an uncertain future. Once in Halifax, a new rhythm takes hold of the film, an accelerated rhythm in part explained by the development of Mary as an artist. At this point the film moves away from masochistic preoccupations with the suffering and failure Mary faces in her life and gradually seems to open to female spectators through the successive transformations Mary navigates to become the subject of her own creative practice.

I noted above that once in Halifax Mary accepts an offer to pose nude for a drawing class at NSCAD. In such a sequence, it is possible to envision Mary as the fetish object of a male spectatorship. I think however, it is difficult to read this in these scenes. Perhaps Mary does become a fetish object, but if so she is quite obviously very uncomfortable in this position. When filmed in these scenes, Mary continually displays the uneasiness that comes from being naked and under the gaze of a room full of students. Harcourt suggests that these scenes are some of the finest in the movie, showing the film artist "recreating within his own work some of the attitudes and subjectivities inherent in

the production of all art" (Harcourt 1987, 20). While indeed true, one of the subjectivities displayed here is the very discomfort felt by the objects of art. I suspect Mary's unease in this scene opens a space for female spectators as an alternative public sphere to identify with Mary as the object of others' gazes, an object who doesn't entirely accept this position. The sequences which follow this scene expand those moments to appeal to women as an alternative public.

For much of the rest of the film, Mary pursues her own artistic development, beginning by sketching herself, then turning to Marie, and finally to Earl. When Mary sketches Earl, her early dependent relationship on him is entirely reversed, not so that Earl is made to look foolish but so that he becomes the hesitant object of Mary's sketching. Near the end of the film, the fruition of Mary's personal development is exemplified by the "one-man show" she holds at a local gallery, displaying Earl in various sketched poses. Finally, as the film concludes, Mary's tentative move towards independence is made complete when she and Marie return to rebuild Nanny's house where they will spend their summers. As Mary, Marie and the grandfather are clearing away bush at the front of the house, Earl drops by and makes a terribly awkward proposal of marriage which Mary quickly refuses.

In all these sequences, Mary's personal development as an artist to a tentative independence is central. Mulvey noted the limited number of spectator positions made available to women in much feature filmmaking, but in *Life Classes* identifications are clearly not limited to relationships of masochism or exhibitionism. Mary's coming-of-age reveals an unwillingness to simply accept the suffering and stagnation that seemed her lot

at the outset of the film. And while it is difficult to determine the audience's responses to this journey of discovery, drawing on Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious, it is possible to suggest that Mary's journey recalls and speaks to women in the audience who are struggling to find their own independent voice. As one reviewer put it: *Life Classes* "celebrates female connectedness and resilience" and gives liberty to the audience to explore these same relationships (Spires 1988, 106). That this identity is tentatively opened up is only encouraged in the film's final moments. As Mary turns away from Earl she walks towards the camera and the scene closes with her gaze staring just off centre from the camera.

At this moment, it seems clear that while the kinds of identification opened up in *Life Classes* are not revolutionary, they create a space to explore and include new identities of independence separate from the limitations of a traditional nuclear family romance. Mary's artistic practice is about a personal development tied to her generational continuities with her mother and her mother before her. This is perhaps not a fundamentally revolutionary journey, but it nonetheless opens a space of participation for female spectators that exists outside of exhibitionism or masochism. In this way, *Life Classes* contains potential moments that invite women as an alternative public to explore issues not normally interrogated in the traditional public sphere. As a result, the relationships created between the film and female spectators point towards the kind of inclusive and mutual participation that points towards the emancipatory hopes of the procedural public sphere.

I have developed the foregoing reading of *Life Classes* in order to suggest the various ways in which this film opens up alternative spectator relationships. Patently, not all these instances will be taken up by spectators, nor is it realistic to think that because *Life Classes* raises concerns over representation, region, memory and gender that it will fundamentally shift the social practices regulating these relationships. However, to talk of *Life Classes* in terms of the aleatory moments of publicness it potentially creates is to argue that film is a powerful and fundamental medium of political intervention, one not always recognized as such in Canada. As a medium of political intervention, the screening of this film becomes what Kluge called a factory of politics, a site where relationships are opened up for audiences organized around communities of region, class, race, and gender to explore their experiences with emancipatory intentions that recall a procedural public sphere. In the film, the narrative form plays out social relationships and concerns that require continued attention and indeed public debate. In this sense, although only one example, *Life Classes* remains a key instance of how we can rethink the articulation of film as a public sphere.

Conclusion

I began this discussion by marking out the concept of the public sphere as an ongoing organizational principle of our political order. I am persuaded by Habermas' argument that a concept of the public "is apparently more and other than a mere scrap of liberal ideology that a social democracy could discard without harm" (Habermas 1989, 4). Recent critics have noted the contradictions and contingencies that undermine Habermas' original formulation of the bourgeois concept of the public sphere. Still, by defending a notion of publicness on the basis of the structures of understanding implicit in the everyday use of language, a procedural concept of the public sphere can be developed to accommodate criticisms posed against notions of publicness.

Habermas' original formulation of the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere in large part inherited a pessimistic mass culture critique from his predecessors in the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer. I believe this kind of pessimism is unwarranted, and in lieu of Habermas' early disregard for film as part of a public sphere, I have argued how the procedural public sphere can be opened up and made useful for the analysis of narrative film. A concept of publicness remains relevant in our political order once we extend the sites where we can find and explore the emancipatory energies implicit to this concept.

In this light, I have illustrated how MacGillivray's *Life Classes* presents an interesting and important example of how Canadian film can create a public sphere. *Life Classes* highlights important strategies through which film can create spaces for spectators from alternative publics to explore relationships of regional, historical loss and gender

oppression through the film text. The relationships created between the film and spectators allow for the production of open, inclusive and rational understandings over the concerns of communities excluded from the traditional public sphere. In this way, I believe the screening of *Life Classes* can point towards the emancipatory hope of a procedural public sphere.

In any discussion of the relationship between spectators and film texts today some measure of reference to the legacy of semiotic, psychoanalytic studies of spectatorship that developed over the course of the 1970's and '80's is unavoidable. Although on the wane today, the legacies of this kind of analysis lurk in the background of my discussion, in many instances playing the role of an unacknowledged spectator against which I develop an analysis of film as a public sphere. In lieu of the difficulties which semiotic and psychoanalytic analyses of spectatorship have when confronted with questions of history, I have turned to Benjamin's work. Notably, I have sought to reinterpret Benjamin's dialectic account of the changing nature of mechanically reproduced aesthetic experience in terms of the idea of public spheres. Film works through systems of production, distribution and consumption, and because of this, film can only make a pretence to emancipatory activity on its own. As Benjamin understood, the systemic nature of film requires that the hope for truly authentic experience can occur only when audiences reclaim actual or latent emancipatory potentials in film into their own life contexts. I argue that once the film text is interpreted through a more complex notion of the public sphere, Benjamin's dialectic account of how audiences might rework and politicize films in their own lives can be used to account for spectator resistance during the consumption

of films. In this context, *Life Classes* invites a political reflexiveness on the part of spectators, a reflexiveness that explores relationships of representation, region, memory and gender often disregarded in mainstream narrative filmmaking.

Invitation and exploration are strange practices to ask of a film in a culture dominated by Hollywood cinema. Here, film so often invites only complacency towards dominant social relationships, and so exploration is left to a minimum; the larger tendency is to limit or minimize political reflections on social power structures. The tie between invitation and exploration in *Life Classes* however, recalls a kind of hopefulness that Habermas had attempted to cull from the liberal tradition of the public sphere. The hope I refer to is a relationship where, in both form and content, possibilities exist to explore, question and ultimately change dominant social relationships. The concept of the public sphere Habermas initially extracted proves too limited but the kind of hope for a critical category of society that his attempt refers to can, I think, be reclaimed as a critical category of the procedural public sphere that applies to spectator relationships opened up in certain narrative films.

Because of the fragile and always only partial stability of the English Canadian film industry, federal and provincial governments have played a significant and not always willing role in the development of English Canadian film. I noted this at the outset in the context of the NFB's rural/industrial film circuits and returned to this theme again when noting production and distribution difficulties encountered by *Life Classes*. The role of the state in the development of English Canadian film has by no means guaranteed that film is part of a public sphere in the sense of publicness I have delineated in a procedural

concept of the public sphere. However, English Canadian film has developed in the context of and often in reaction to Hollywood's domination over domestic movie audiences. Because of this, the federal and provincial state have been a locus for cultural policy and funding to mobilize the development of an English Canadian film industry in response to Hollywood cinema. This fact on its own does not guarantee that the emancipatory hopes described in the procedural concept of the public sphere have been achieved in the history of Canadian film. But the circumstances underwriting Hollywood's domination of commercial film production, distribution and consumption in Canada have created a clearer tradition of state-sponsored intervention to encourage the production of certain films which have constituted a more critically engaged, politically reflexive, and public cinema in English Canada. This is the case, even if the federal and provincial state have not always been willing to fully embrace such a project.

I refer to this dynamic in the history of Canadian cultural production, because, while my discussion has delineated a critical category of the public sphere, and traced the relationship of this category in one narrative film, the next step is to extend this analysis to use the expanded concepts of the procedural public sphere, production public spheres and alternative public spheres to rethink and retrace the development of English Canadian film. The history of English Canadian film is being written and continues to be contested through such revisionist histories as Joyce Nelson's intervention over the impact of Grierson in English Canadian film. Debates over the public sphere bring to this history critical categories to interrogate how the Canadian state and the Hollywood film industry have abandoned emancipatory hopes for film and remained content to relegate the

production and consumption of film to the contingencies and inequalities of the market place. But the categories of the public sphere which I developed above also generate concepts that anticipate how Canadians have tried to use film, and increasingly video, more clearly for the purposes of resistance to dominant social relationships. I suspect that within the contradictions and contingencies that link together the history of English Canadian film, a tradition and an history of creating a critical, procedural public sphere through film have been achieved, if only in part, at different moments in the history of our cinema. It is this kind of analysis where a more comprehensive sense of the public sphere could be developed within the margins and hopes of film in Canada.

Bibliography.

Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. (1972). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Continuum.

-----. "Culture Industry Reconsidered". (Fall 1975). *New German Critique*. 13: 12-19.

Africville Genealogy Society. (1992). *The Spirit of Africville*. Halifax: Formac.

"A legitimate public debate." (7 April 1993). Editorial. Montreal Gazette. B2.

Alioff, Maurie. (Fall 1994). "The Outsider: Pierre Falardeau". *Take One*. 8-13.

Balides, Constance. (Spring 1993). "Scenarios of Exposure in the Practice of Everyday Life: Women in the Cinema of Attractions". *Screen*. 34: 19-37.

Benhabib, Seyla. (1992). "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jurgen Habermas." *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Craig Calhoun. Cambridge: MIT Press, 73-98.

Benjamin, Walter. (1968). *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books.

-----. (1986) *Reflections*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken Books.

Bergstrom, Janet and Mary Ann Doane. (Summer 1989). "The Female Spectator: Contexts and Directions." *Camera Obscura*. 20-21: 5-27.

Brantlinger, Patrick. (1990). *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America*. New York: Routledge.

Calhoun, Craig. (1992). "Habermas and the Public Sphere." *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Craig Calhoun. Cambridge: MIT Press. 1-48.

de Lauretis, Teresa. (1984). *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

-----. (1987). *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Dorland, Michael. (1988). "The Shadow of Canadian Cinema: Bruce Elder's Immodest Proposal." *Documents in Canadian Film*. Ed. Douglas Fetherling. Peterborough: Broadview. 316-322.

Doane, Mary Ann. (Sept/Oct 1982). "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." *Screen* 23: 74-88.

Elder, Bruce. (1988). "The Cinema We Need." *Documents in Canadian Film*. Ed. Douglas Fetherling. Peterborough: Broadview. 260-271.

-----. (1989). *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press.

Eley, Geoff. (1992). "Nations, Publics and Politcal Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century." *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Craig Calhoun. 289-339.

Falardeau, Pierre. (7 April 1993). "Film-maker Falardeau accuses senator of censorship." Montreal Gazette. B3.

Felski, Rita. (1989). *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

Fraser, Nancy. (1989). "What's Critical About Critical Theory?: The Case of Habermas and Gender." *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Ed. Nancy Fraser. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. 113-143.

-----. (1992). "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Craig Calhoun. 109-142.

Gigantes, Philippe D. (7 April 1993). "Work glorifying FLQ should not get federal money senator says." *Montreal Gazette*. B3.

Gledhill Christine. (1984). "Developments in Feminist Film Criticism." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams. Frederick: AFI. 18-45.

Grant, George, (1969). *Technology and Empire*. Concord: Anansi.

Habermas, Jurgen. (1975). *Legitimation Crisis*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon.

-----. (Spring 1979). "Consciousness Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin." *New German Critique*. 17: 30-59.

-----. (1984 and 1987). *The Theory of Communicative Action.* 2 vols. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

-----. (1985). The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity: Twelve *Lectures*. Trans. Fredric Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press.

-----. (1985b). "Questions and Countequestions." *Habermas and Modernity*. Ed. Richard Bernstein. Cambridge: MIT Press. 192-216.

-----. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge: MIT Press.

-----. (1992). "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere." *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Craig Calhoun. Trans. Thomas Berger. Cambridge: MIT Press. 421-461.

Handling, Piers. (1988). "The Cinema We Need?" *Documents in Canadian Film*. Ed. Douglas Fetherling. Peterborough: Broadview. 284-293.

Hansen, Miriam. (Winter 1987). "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology'." *New German Critique*. 40: 179-224.

-----. (Fall 1988). "Reinventing the Nickelodeon: Notes on Kluge and Early Cinema." *New German Critique*. 46: 179-198.

-----. (Summer 1989). Commentary. *Camera Obscura*. 20-21: 169-174.

-----. (1991). *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

-----. (Winter 1993). "Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres: Negt and Kluge's *The Public Sphere and Experience*, Twenty Years Later." *Public Culture*. 5: 179-212.

-----. (Spring 1994). "Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Permutations of the Public Sphere." *Screen*. 34: 6-17.

Harcourt, Peter. (Nov. 1987). "Planting Pictures: an appreciation of the films of William D. MacGillivray." *Cinema Canada*. 14-21.

Henderson, Colin. (Nov. 1987). "Inter-view: William MacGillivray." *Cinema Canada.* 15-21.

Jameson, Fredric. (1971). *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

Jay, Martin. (1985). "Habermas and Modernism." *Habermas and Modernity*. Ed. Richard Bernstein. Cambridge: MIT Press. 125-139.

Johnson, William. (31 March 1993). "Film full of hateful sterotypes shouldn't get tax money." *Montreal Gazette*. B3.

-----. (24 December 1993). "Ottawa-funded-fim shows racist image of anglos." *Montreal Gazette*. B5.

Kaplan, E.Ann. (1983). *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera.* New York: Methuen.

Kelly, Paul and Susan Lord. (1994). "Driven to Distraction: Going to the Movies with Walter and Siegfried." *CineAction*. 34: 20-25.

Kluge, Alexander. (Fall/Winter 1981/82). "Film and the Public Sphere." *New German Critique*. 24/25: 25-49.

Lapsley, Robert and Michael Westlake. (1988). *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Manchester: Manchester UP.

Life Classes. (1987). Writer and Dir. William D. MacGillivray. Cinephile.

Lockerbie, Ian. (1984). "Grierson and Realism." *John Grierson and the NFB*. Eds. The John Grierson Project-McGill University. Toronto: ECW. 25-49.

MacGillivray, William D. (1994). telephone interview. 18 November 1994.

Majka, Christopher. (Dec. 1986). "*Life Classes* - Searching for a Lost Heritage." *Cinema Canada*. 4.

Marks, Laura U. (Fall 1993). "Packaged For Export, Contents Under Pressure." *Fuse*. 12-23.

Marx, Karl. (1978). "On the Jewish Question." *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert Tucker. New York: W.W.Norton. 26-52.

McCarthy, Thomas. (1984). "Translator's Introduction." The Theory of Communicative Action. I. Boston: Beacon Press. v-xxxvii.

McLarty, Lianne. (1990). "Imagining the Past and Place: Memory and Landscape in the Films of Richard Hancox." *Richard Hancox*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario. 11-39.

Metick, Hans. (1982). "Plebian Culture in the Transition to Capitalism." *Culture, Ideology and Politics: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm*. Eds. Ralph Samuel and G. Stedman-Jones. London: Routledge. 19-45.

Metz, Christian. (1982). *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*. Trans. Ben Brewster et.al. London: MacMillan.

Morse, Margaret. (1986). "The Television News Personality and Credibility: Reflections on the News in Transition." *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Ed. Tanya Modleski. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 55-79.

Mulvey, Laura. (1989a). "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Ed. Laura Mulvey. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 14-26.

-----. (1989b). "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Ed. Laura Mulvey. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 29-38.

Negt, Oskar and Alexander Kluge. (Fall 1988). "*The Public Sphere and Experience*: Selections." *October*. Trans. Peter Labanyi. 46: 60-82.

Nelson, Joyce. (1988). *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend*. Toronto: Between the Lines.

Nichols, Bill. Ed. (1985). *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*. 2. Berkeley: University of California.

Pendakur, Manjunath. (1990). *Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry*. Toronto: Garamond.

Richards, David Adams. (1989). *Nights Below Station Street*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

-----. (1993). *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

Ryan, Mary. (1992). "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America." *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Craid Calhoun. Cambridge: MIT Press. 259-288.

Senchuk, Barbara. (19 Oct. 1983). "Filmmaker MacGillivray determined to succeed outside'centres of excellence'." *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*. I-29.

Spires, Randi, (1988). "Film Review: *Vera* and *Life Classes*." *Canadian Women's Studies*. 9: 105-107.

Thompson, Edward. (1963). *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Metheun.

Thompson, John. (1981). *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jurgen Habermas*. New York: Cambridge UP.

-----. (1990). *Ideology and Modern Culture*. Stanford: Stanford UP.

Understanding Bliss. (1990). Dir. William D. MacGillivray. Writer. Kathryn Cochran. Picture Plant Releasing.

Warren, Ina. (26 April 1988). "*Life Classes* taught Cormier about herself." *Halifax Chronicle Herald*. 19.

Wellmer, Albrecht. (1991). *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*. Trans. D. Midgley. Cambridge: Polity.

Williams, Linda. (1988). "Feminist Film Theory: Mildred Pierce and the Second World War." *Female Spectators*. Ed. Deidre Pribram. New York: Verso. 12-30.

Wintonick, Peter. (Nov. 1987). "William D. MacGillivray's *Life Classes*." *Cinema Canada*. 24-25.