

Between Heaven and Hell: David Wojnarowicz's *Where Evil Dwells*

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The goal of this seminar as I see it is to stand at the intersection of two artificially divided realms of mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic production, that is, the gallery context of the “fine” arts (the “high” end of the cultural pendulum) and the popular context of the film industry (the “low” end of said pendulum), and to integrate, or at least reconcile, the two. The sign that stands at this crossroads, always a no-mans-land of perdition and the gibbet, would perhaps read “experimental film.” In the spirit of reconciling such an artificial (institutionally promulgated) division, I offer the following paper, a mini-monograph on the artist David Wojnarowicz. This artist, a true polymath, excelled across media, from painting to photography to site-specific installation to performance to filmmaking to writing. My hope is his work becomes a kind of proof, if such a thing need exist, of the social basis of such dividing as goes on in the separate realms of high and low art, high and low culture, exclusive and popular institutions. In this paper, I will move from a brief biography of the artist to a consideration of his early works, with the bulk of the paper being an analysis and contextualization of his one extant film work (1985's *Where Evil Dwells*) that serves as a bridge to his later, “mature” output across a variety of media. Perhaps in developing a reading of both his film and his life, the cohesiveness or homogeneity of forms and methods in the postwar period we examined can come into focus, as, in the heterogeneity of his person and process, that is, as an artist, he is just one example among many.

## Biography<sup>1</sup>

David Wojnarowicz was born in 1954 in Red Bank, NJ “to a sailor from Detroit and a very young woman from Australia” (Blinderman 1990). His childhood was hard even by harsh standards. David’s mother and father divorced when he was only two, and from this point onward he had no permanent home or caretakers. Between the years of 1956, when his parents divorced, and 1959, when his father remarried, Wojnarowicz recounts living in an “orphanage or boarding home” without either parent, after which (1957) he was kidnapped to Detroit by his father. Once the aforementioned remarriage occurred, David settled with his father and stepmother back in New Jersey, in a blue collar suburban fringe. David’s father was a chronic alcoholic and was absent for long stretches of time (being a merchant seaman), leaving David with long periods of boredom and emptiness punctuated by the violence that accompanied his father’s returns. The empty time was spent primarily at various outlaw activities, both sexual and social (by eight he had already had his first sexual encounter and had been involved in several petty crimes); it was also spent, however, in long sojourns away from home and into the surrounding wild areas (he recounts many formative experiences encountering or contemplating animals in the local woods and swamps). He stayed in New Jersey, suffering extreme physical and mental abuse at the hands of his father, until he was ten, at which point he contacted his birth mother and moved, in 1963, to live with her in Manhattan. His mother was less abusive and more encouraging than his father, but also very neglectful, and so the liminal life that he led in

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<sup>1</sup> The following biography is meant only to give a bare skeleton on which one can hang a discussion of Wojnarowicz’s work; it is problematic for several reasons. First, it is quite short.. Secondly, most of the information is taken directly from the artist’s own writings or recollections, which calls into question the objectivity of the information. I chose to use the artist’s own information simply because of the relative scarceness of biographical data from third parties; the few biographies out there about him that I did locate seem to plumb the same material

the semi-rural suburbs was transferred onto the city. He moved into the dual role of student (“Was encouraged by my mom to paint and draw” or “Got skipped a grade in school. Started taking French lessons”) and flaneur/vagrant (“Endless 42<sup>nd</sup> st. movies for 69 cents ... Met various men this way”). He also chronicles having emotional and mental problems starting at this time and lasting until his late teens. In 1966, he began hustling, and from this point onward until the mid-1970s he was basically a vagrant, sometimes living at home, most of the time not. This period, possibly the most formative in terms of his art and his philosophy, is chronicled in the collaborative graphic novel 7 Miles a Second.

Wojnarowicz the artist was born in 1971, when he first began to keep a journal during an Outward Bound expedition that was meant to intervene in his delinquency. It would be just over ten years from this point to his first solo exhibition in New York. During this period, chronicled both in David’s diaries and memoir, he acquired the bulk of experience that would feed his mature art. He traveled extensively, crossing the country as a vagrant by both rail and thumb, encountering and being influenced by both the spectacular landscape of the north (Montana, Wyoming) and south (Arizona, New Mexico) west and the imaginative landscapes of the subjects he encountered along the way (which would later form into forty small character monologues collected after his death as The Waterfront Journals). In New York, he began to participate in the anonymous homosexual cruising culture that centered around abandoned warehouses on the lower east side of Manhattan. It is here as well that he first began to explore new materials, making his entrance into painting via site-specific works both on the street and in abandoned buildings. He also began to take himself seriously as an artist during this time,

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(his own) for facts.

producing his first major work, a series of twenty-four black and white prints entitled “Arthur Rimbaud in New York” [figure 1]. During the late seventies and early eighties, Wojnarowicz both participated in this world and began to make connections (through various jobs at clubs like Danceteria) among the growing No Wave or punk community forming in New York at the time. By the mid-eighties he had been doing street art (murals and graffiti) on his own for some time and began to collaborate with many of the key artists in the Transgression movement (directing his main film, *Satan Teens*, later edited down into *Where Evil Dwells*, with Tommy Turner, constructing installations with and acting in films by Richard Kern). Unlike most of the Transgression members, however, Wojnarowicz had some exposure as an artist, and although his diaries show him conflicted about the possibility of the “legitimate” art world being the proper outlet for his work, he still worked toward such recognition as an artist. He also met the photographer Peter Hujar during this time, which became possibly the most important relationship in his adult life. During the late eighties David began integrating various elements of his style into a unified personal iconography and began to synthesize his interests in “high” and “low” art. The last stage of Wojnarowicz’s life began with the death of Peter Hujar from AIDS in 1987. After this point, and especially after his own diagnosis, Wojnarowicz’s work grows more politically strident and existentially bereft. It is at this stage of his life that he receives his greatest public attention, as his memoir Close to the Knives was published in 1991 and he had a very public battle with both the NEA (and senator Jesse Helms) and New York cardinal John O’Conner. He also became associated with the radical politics of ACT-UP at this time. The last years of his life were spent in court and battling advanced AIDS. He died in 1992.

## **Tropes in Wojnarowicz's Art Leading up to *Where Evil Dwells***

The preceding biography is very skeletal in the interest of getting to Wojnarowicz's art. I hope, in this section, to outline the two main tropes or overarching themes that ran throughout Wojnarowicz's art up until the time he filmed the main consideration of this paper, *Satan Teens* (later *Where Evil Dwells*). I am hoping that this will illustrate the artist's interests in a way that the biography could not. I am not considering David's large body of writing simply because I am trying to contrast David's visual production in other media with his major film work. This section, then, intends to briefly investigate Wojnarowicz's early visual art (1978-1985) in the context of his personal influences ("high art") and his artistic practices and materials ("low art").

I will not be addressing any performance work, saving that instead for inclusion in the discussion of his film, nor will I address the very last section of Wojnarowicz's life, as his political stance and philosophy in the face of AIDS is conveyed more through his written material and would really require a different set of parameters to study thoroughly.

### **I. Personal Influence**

Wojnarowicz's first major visual work, the series "Arthur Rimbaud in New York" [fig. 1], inaugurates a body of work in which Wojnarowicz reveals his process of trying to identify a place in the history of art and create a unique voice as an artist by working through a series of artists who have personally influenced him. The Rimbaud series explicates this by transposing the figure of Rimbaud, in the form of a very one-dimensional mask, onto various bodies in the urban landscape. On a basic level, this series pays homage to a figure that Wojnarowicz felt a close proximity toward, both in terms of Rimbaud's work, philosophy, and life (as an object of

erotic fantasy). On a second level, it addresses themes that recur in much of Wojnarowicz's work: the power of the anonymous erotic gaze, the obsession with masks and their transformative power, the integration of the subjective (fantasy) into the everyday. By placing Rimbaud, who is only Rimbaud and not an anonymous street hustler because of the thin visage placed before him (which ironically guarantees his anonymity), in the environs of the modern urban landscape (Wojnarowicz's own personal milieu, as described in his memoirs), Wojnarowicz marks the impossibility of his longing for an artistic identity by questioning the possibility of any kind of authentic identity that is not anonymous. It is a conflicted work, hopeful in the sense that it acknowledges the transforming power of both erotic contact and fantasy (and specifically homoerotic contact and fantasy) in that within the erotic moment the lover may be both anonymous and, because of this anonymity, anyone at all (Rimbaud even), but the work is pessimistic in that the possibility fulfilled becomes thin and without a topography, like the mask. The work marks both the possibility and problems of speaking, as an artist, in an authentic voice by questioning the possibility of authentic identity.

Another work, slightly later and displaying much different technique, that explores issues of identity and influence is the painting "Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian" [fig. 2]. In this work, as in the Rimbaud series, Wojnarowicz works through issues of the confluence of a history coming to bear on a specific subjectivity, but in this case the figure of the real lover (Peter Hujar) replaces the impossible lover (Rimbaud). History is cast here as a specific history (a homosexual lineage) that has the possibility to pierce the living (Hujar) through indirect means (the buffer of dream reality). Like Rimbaud, the work explores the dichotomy of the real and the unreal (or fantastic) in both universal and immanent terms:

universal in the contrast of the map's geography underlying or supporting the sleeping Hujar to the surrounding star-field, immanent in the figure of Hujar being pierced (the geography of the body) compared against a field of personal influence. What is equally important is the way in which this dichotomy is traversed, in the way in which all elements are imbricated in a deep way (the star field does not end at the edge of the map, but rather they flow together, just as Hujar is literally pierced by arrows which we read as symbolic aspects of his dreaming mind).

Wojnarowicz's use of material (in this case spray paint) also emphasizes the questionable nature of borders and distinct separations by emphasizing an aura around some of the figures (Hujar) and disappearance around others (the map fading into the star-field).

Finally, two collages of this early period emphasize similar issues of influence and artistic voice not by exploring the dichotomy of real and unreal in terms of content, but in terms of material; that is, the collage aspect of these works collapses the space of ambiguity present in the first two works into a homogenous field where all is real or all is subjective. The first of these, "Bill Burroughs' Recurring Dream" [fig. 3], again emphasizes the subjective activity of dreaming, but the issues of identity are raised through the title and its questioning of authorship. The collage claims to be Bill Burroughs' dream, but is obviously Wojnarowicz's fantasy of his dream, with images plundered from Burroughs' literary iconography (the emphasis on bodily transformation, the one-dimensional Orientalism and exoticism, the figure of the worm).

Likewise, the collage "Untitled (Genet)" [fig. 4] also implicates one artist in the other.

Wojnarowicz had a lifelong adversity to and extreme dislike of Catholicism, so the placement of Genet in the foreground with a halo clearly marks this as Wojnarowicz creating a personal holy ground through the influence and re-appropriation of another artist. Like the Burroughs piece,

this work places Genet's iconography (drug use, violence and crime, destitution) into Wojnarowicz's imaginative space, imbricating both history in the artist's work (Genet influencing Wojnarowicz) and the artist as arbiter of history (Wojnarowicz revitalizing and reinventing Genet). In its use of imagery of ruins, this work also leads into the next overarching theme in Wojnarowicz's work, a theme central to his entire body of work, that is, trash and decay, or the dialectic between the hidden and the manifest (the figure of the ruin).

## II. Trash

The above perhaps would lead one to believe that Wojnarowicz's oeuvre of the late 70's and early 80's contains works that are more traditional, when in fact the artist gained his first recognition for visual work in very non-traditional forums. Like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Wojnarowicz came to prominence through his site specific work, although Basquiat gained a patron (Warhol) whereas Wojnarowicz insisted on creating works that were politically loaded and hence relegated him to the relative obscurity of the No Wave scene. This portion of his life also introduces the image of the ruin, an image that would resonate across the artist's life and body of work, and which will be discussed later in terms of symbolic value; here, ruination is manifest in the material interests of the artist, namely trash, garbage, abandoned places, etc. Starting in the early 1980's, Wojnarowicz began to create in the same spaces that he had previously frequented in search of (usually erotic) experience: the street, abandoned warehouses, squats. Many of these works cross the border from site specific painting and mural work or graffiti art into performance as the act of creating the works is politically as important as the content of the work.

One example of this work, perhaps an emblematic example, is the 1981 painting “Untitled (Burning House Stencil)” [fig. 5]. The catalog version of this piece is spray paint on newsprint, but originally Wojnarowicz was stenciling the burning house as a kind of personal icon onto the streets. The work addresses themes that the artist would often return to, such as emblems of panic and disaster, of social pressure and the hidden nature of abjection, but does so in an anonymous voice, as if a harbinger or talisman, an apocalyptic warning from a visionary vagabond. It is political in its intended effects, as it works over the dialectic of concealment and revelation that would also be very important to Wojnarowicz’s conception of the ruin; this piece is emblematic of the artist’s desire to shock and alarm the public into considering a notion of disaster that cannot be historically located and subsequently sealed off from the psyche via memorialization by anonymously placing the imagery of distress on the very surface of the social itself (the street). The image will return in Wojnarowicz’s iconography as a (usually anonymous) human form set afire.

A second type of graffiti work that Wojnarowicz engaged in at this time was more traditional in terms of composition (use of multiple colors and the free-form, rather than stenciled, application of paint). Examples of this type of work are several untitled warehouse paintings of animals (in one case a pterodactyl, in the second a cow’s head) [fig. 6 & 7]. Another example of this is a series of garbage can lids painted with iconographic wolves’ heads (“Untitled, 1982”) [fig. 8]. The deeper symbolic importance of the animal forms (and their political implications) will have to be ignored for the moment; suffice it to say that Wojnarowicz utilized dinosaur imagery frequently (as a stand-in for a once present history now buried and forgotten in an existential sense), that the cow imagery marks the border of what we could

classify as “the animal” (the obviously sick or dying visage a stand-in for abject suffering in general), and that the wolf is important for Wojnarowicz as both shamanistic totem and marker of a different kind of consciousness (the multiple, that pack). On a material level, the works simply explicate the artist’s need to mark discarded or disregarded surfaces with evidence of care and life - a valorization of that which society disavows and a critique of that disavowal through the explication of a dialectic of revelation and concealment.

The next type of example I want to emphasize here is also perhaps the most politically activated (the most actively critical) not only because of the content of the imagery but because of the guerilla tactics utilized in their creation. “Delta Towels” (1983) [fig. 9] is one of a series of posters the artist altered with graffiti to make a political statement. The poster critiques consumption not in the expected ways (a more Marxist critique might have emphasized the difference between production and consumption by replacing the spray painted imagery of human/animal sexual contact with imagery of the original state of the product being described, i.e. a stencil of trees or a forest over the paper towel advertisement), but instead critiques the social as a whole. That is, it questions not how we produce, but rather what is possible to produce; it criticizes a social order in general, an order that dictates what is and is not permissible in terms of human interaction with and exploration of objects and subjects in the world. The poster works through shock and obviously supports Wojnarowicz’s sexual politics (a polymorphous perversity not unlike that of Eisenstein), but its goal is simply to open up the possible in the form of thinking through new ways of interacting with our environment. The work also reemphasizes the concealment/revelation dialectic I have been emphasizing, in that Wojnarowicz seeks to reveal hidden practices to the general public and link them with the

equally hidden practices of capitalist production, but in choosing such shocking and non-communicative imagery to convey this he also willfully makes obscure and conceals his meaning (while also simultaneously hiding the original message of the poster and making that message impossible). In the posters “Slam Click” and “Tuna” (1983) [fig. 10], Wojnarowicz replaces the more obscure content of “Delta Towels” with a blatant recognition of outlaw culture. Here he blends his personal influences (the prison iconography of isolation and sadness of Genet in “Slam Click,” the sexualized violence of Burroughs and Genet in “Tuna”) and interest in high art with low art materials, creating a work that is politicized but also personal. We see in these works a more explicit association with outlaw culture that will resurface again in Wojnarowicz’s collaborations with Transgression artists and in *Where Evil Dwells*.

The final type of work I want to address could be called ready-mades altered into personal totems. In “Science Totem” (1983) [fig. 11], Wojnarowicz begins to show evidence of a synthesis of high and low art that would mark his transition to a personal, mature iconography. The work again raises issues around the totem and the shaman, Native American culture (something that was deeply important for Wojnarowicz), and the processes of the rational which both cover over and are implicated in an idea of magic. Similarly, “Untitled (Burning Child)” (1984) [fig. 12] functions in an iconographic fashion and addresses the synthesis of personal influence and trash culture, but does so in a political way that recalls the burning house stencils. The work shocks and confounds but also raises issues about the borders of subjectivity, about the geographies of the body and of the Earth as being deeply imbricated in each other, and about hidden suffering made manifest (the pressures of artificial division as leading to abjection and eruption). These works all lead up to 1985, the year Wojnarowicz became heavily involved in

collaborative projects with other Transgression members, and which, I will argue, marks a turning point in his style that is manifest in a more embryonic form in the pieces above.

### *Where Evil Dwells*

In 1985, Wojnarowicz began filming, with Tommy Turner, footage to be used in a project entitled *Satan Teens*, which eventually became *Where Evil Dwells*. Wojnarowicz was not primarily a film maker. Besides *Where Evil Dwells* (1986), there are only two videos in distribution, which were made later in collaboration with video artist Phil Zwickler, 1989's *Itsofomo* (a document of a multi-media performance with musician Ben Neill) and 1990's *Fear of Disclosure* (a short video subtitled *The Psycho-Social Implications of HIV Revelation*). Besides these works in distribution, Wojnarowicz made several other films, all shot in super-8 and all at various stages of completion; one film before the *Satan Teens* project (1979's *Heroin*, which I know little about) and several after (1987's *A Fire in My Belly*, a thirty minute film comprised of footage taken during a trip to Mexico, being the only one of these that I have seen stills from). Wojnarowicz says, of his relation to the Transgression movement and to film making, "I think maybe it's just philosophically or something, but I thought I was pretty peripheral to that whole film scene. I participated in some of it. ... I always felt like I was watching from or witnessing it from the side" (Sergeant 138). It is probably impossible to account for Wojnarowicz's place inside the Transgression movement except to say that he thought of himself as peripheral to it (as he felt peripheral to or was uneasy as a part of any movement throughout his career as an artist). It is also problematic to attempt to integrate *Where Evil Dwells* into Wojnarowicz's body of work not only because of his ambivalent stance towards film but also because the film is co-directed. I

will simply attempt to outline in general the contents and structure of *Where Evil Dwells*, then briefly suggest how it differs from a few other films of the movement (using Wojnarowicz himself as a link, comparing films in which he had input not as a director but as an actor), and finally examine some of the political implications of the film's content, trying to see the film as not only a culmination of interests expressed in Wojnarowicz's earlier art (the high/low or "personal influence"/"Trash" dichotomy previously explicated), but also suggest that the film's formal elements might help explain a shift in his two-dimensional work concurrent with and post-dating the film. The many problematic aspects of such a reading, for example the above mentioned problem of co-direction and the overall problem of presenting a movement as incredibly varied and heterogeneous as Transgression as a monolithic entity, are recognized but will not be resolved.

The *Satan Teens* project was originally conceived of as a full-length feature shot on super-8 sync sound film, but as is often the case with low or no budget projects and underground film in general, the final product differs greatly from the original outline. The film was intended as a narrative centered around the then-infamous case of so-called Long Island "Satan Teen" Rick Kasso, who was accused of killing friend Gary Lauwers in the town of Northport, Long Island on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, 1984. According to a New York Times article about the killings from July 8<sup>th</sup> of 1984, Kasso was "a well-adjusted, happy youth, a B-student at Northport High School, until he became involved with drugs and 'the wrong people' in recent years and began running away from home." The killing was motivated by drugs, with Kasso believing that the victim had stolen angel dust from him, but it was the "Satanic" aspect of the case that caught the attention of the media. Kasso was arrested wearing an AC/DC t-shirt adorned with a picture of Satan, and

was supposedly the ring leader of a cult called “Knights of the Black Circle,” which, according to the Times, boasted a membership of some 20 local teens. The victim was stabbed in the head and neck 17 times by Kasso as two of his cronies held him down, and was reportedly forced to say “I love Satan” as he died. Kasso had previously been in trouble for burgling a skull from a 19<sup>th</sup> century grave in the area and was living on the street at the time of the killing. During the night of July 8<sup>th</sup>, Kasso hung himself by a bed sheet in his prison cell while awaiting trial.

The film was a narrativization of this event and was shot by Wojnarowicz and Tommy Turner both in and around the locale of the murders and in various empty warehouses and other locations in Manhattan. *Satan Teens* was never completed, however, because most of the footage was destroyed in a fire at Tommy Turner’s apartment. *Where Evil Dwells* is what remains of the project, a trailer that Wojnarowicz and Turner created over a two day period to publicize the film at the Downtown New York Film Festival curated by Tessa Hughs-Freeland and Ela Troyano. The trailer still contains the kernel of the narrative that was originally envisioned, but significantly confuses it, as the running time is reduced from two hours to thirty minutes, and the soundtrack is very fragmented, being a combination of voice-over, heavy-metal music (AC/DC), industrial music (by frequent Kern collaborators Wiseblood), and collaged material from other sources (discussed in more detail below). The trailer dramatizes Kasso’s delinquency and criminality, with the second half given over to a fantasy sequence in which, after his suicide, he first attempts to enter heaven, is turned away, and then enters hell. Below is a more detailed (semi-complete) summary of the film, which can be broken into four quasi-discreet parts: an introduction/title sequence, the crime, heaven, and finally hell.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For the interested reader, the film is available online at <http://www.ubu.com/film/wojnarowicz.html>. This version,

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while clearer than my personal VHS copy, has an annoying up-and-down motion to the framing that is not present in the original.

## I. Title Sequence/Introduction

The film begins with a close-up of a Howdy-Doody ventriloquist's dummy. This gravely-voiced dummy serves as a kind of narrator/devil's advocate throughout the film, commenting on the action (usually in ironic or crude fashion) either via voice-over or via cutbacks as the film progresses. The dummy is held by an apparently dead Wojnarowicz (he appears bloodied) but talks and moves by itself. Cut to a medium shot of the figure of a girl hanging by the neck from an industrial-looking metal structure while Howdy comments on the girl as a victim of Ricky Kasso; the shot then zooms out to a long shot showing the "girl" in her surroundings as romantic fifties-type Muzak swells into the sound mix. Cut back to a close-up of David Wojnarowicz's face, half in shadow, showing the gruesome details of his demise: one eye hangs out of its socket, blood oozes copiously from his mouth, which is widened into a delirious grin; the shot zooms out to show Howdy still in the scene, now commenting on the cast of the film ("Rockets [Redglare, frequent Transgression player] as Christ"). Cut to the title shot, which consists of a medium shot of an anonymous suburban house over which Wojnarowicz spray paints the title (this is accomplished via a piece of Plexiglas that the camera shoots through) as the romantic music and Howdy voice over cut off abruptly to be replaced by a hammering percussion sound and a low-voiced singer growling "Where Evil Dwells," the song composed for the film by Wiseblood. A series of quick-cutting shots ensues, portraying the Satan Teens in a field with abandoned buses, using poles or sticks to break out headlights and windows. The end of this sequence is marked by a return of the Howdy Doody voice and a series of low hollow bell sounds, upon which a cut back to a close-up of the dummy occurs. Howdy again comments on the material of the film

(calling the vandalism “an easy way to clean windows”) and a zoom out reveals Tommy Turner entering from off screen right, holding a machete, which he uses to topple Wojnarowicz’s body over face first, taking his place as the “ventriloquist.” Turner engages Howdy in a conversation that fades away as AC/DC’s “Hell’s Bells” (mentioned in the Times story) fades up onto the soundtrack.

## II. The Crime

The second section of the film portrays Kasso’s escalating delinquency and commission of the murder. It begins with a medium shot of a closed curtain, which opens to reveal the Devil (artist Joe Coleman, dressed as a priest) standing on the left and Kasso kneeling on the right, with an inverted cross on the wall behind them separating the space between them. As smoke rises, the Devil drinks from a goblet and blows the libation onto Kasso’s face, whereupon we zoom in to reveal his face dripping in blood. Cut to a long shot of the Teens in a cemetery at night, digging up a grave, finally hauling a skeleton out of the grave and Kasso holding it aloft in a gesture of display/admiration. The skeleton is dumped in front of a gravestone marked Gifford, after which Kasso attempts to break off the skull with his shovel and, upon failing to do so, twists it off with his hands (distorted, speed-adjusted guitar sounds mix into the continuing AC/DC music during this). Cut back to a medium shot of Howdy on Turner’s lap; Turner asks Howdy, in mock innocence, “What’s this all about?,” to which Howdy replies “An exposition of evil in America.” Turner responds, with even more mock innocence, “What’s evil?,” to which Howdy responds “Let me show you,” whereupon he turns and (via stop motion animation) stabs Turner to death, with Turner slumping backward, covered in blood. After this, the rising delinquency of the teens is portrayed in a multi-shot sequence where they dangle and then dump

a dummy dressed as a pedestrian from an overpass onto the Long Island Expressway in an attempt to cause a traffic accident (Wojnarowicz plays the unlucky motorist). Cut to Howdy in close-up, again commenting on the action taking place (“That’ll teach you to walk on the Long Island Expressway”). Now the depiction of the actual crime begins, with a cut from Howdy to a front-seat first person shot of a roller coaster being pulled up the first big hill at the start of the ride; the soundtrack switches at this point from AC/DC to the full version of Wiseblood’s “Where Evil Dwells,” which begins with a series of low, tone-like sounds. The crime is portrayed through a pattern of intercutting four types of filmed material in a rapidly escalating manner that matches both the increasing pace of violence during the crime itself and the rapidly increasing velocity of the rollercoaster ride. The four types of material intercut here (across approximately 50 shots taking up 8-10 minutes of screen time) are:

- 1) shots of the rollercoaster ride (all from a first-person perspective)
- 2) shots of the Devil, now dressed in an obsolete style, shambling across a railroad trestle and subsequently self-combusting (Coleman here accomplishes this by exploding fireworks concealed under his clothing, an action that formed part of his own performance work as “Dr. Momboozoo”)
- 3) shots of the commission of the crime, filmed at night around a campfire in the woods, during which we witness Lauwers being beaten and then stabbed in the face and neck in graphic detail (accomplished with a surprisingly effective prosthetic head with a moveable tongue)
- 4) daytime shots taken in the woods of natural analogues to the violence being visited upon Lauwers, first in the form of a wounded bird thrashing across the forest floor and then of a dead dog or fox which is pulled aside to reveal swarms of maggots underneath

These materials are cut to suggest the rollercoaster as an analogue to the tribulation occurring in Kasso's mind, which then becomes a more general symbol of the "engine" of the crime, with the coaster cresting its first peak occurring simultaneously with the Devil combusting and Kasso rising across the campfire to strike Lauwers for the first time. As the violence of the crime accelerates, so too does the motion of and cutting of the rollercoaster footage, which is then mixed, once Lauwers is first stabbed, with the footage of the wounded bird and then, as the violence reaches obscene levels, with the footage of the desiccated dog and the maggots. The soundtrack is constructed to buttress this pattern, with the opening low tones giving way to the same rapid hammering percussion that plays during the title sequence, and finally climaxes in a cacophony of over-driven guitars, relentless percussion, and a screaming lead vocalist. The sequence ends with the death of Lauwers, at which point a cut to the wounded bird thrashing from the forest floor into water occurs, and finally a cut back to Howdy Doody; in this, his last appearance, he brandishes the knife used to kill Turner before being dragged screaming toward the camera until his form blacks out the visual field.

### **III. Heaven**

This sequence is the shortest of the four parts of the film and also is the main demarcation in the film between a portrayal of the facts of the crime and an imaginary portrayal of Kasso's journey after his suicide. The section begins with a shot of Kasso in a dimly lit, very small entrance hall decorated with small paintings; he is dressed only in jeans, with no shirt, and is trying to pass by a man dressed in a suit who seems to be acting as a security guard/bouncer. The soundtrack likewise changes over from the screams of Howdy Doody to lounge-infused organ music. Kasso cannot get by the bouncer. The camera then tracks left, either cutting or moving

through a curtain, until we see the object of Kasso's desire, Christ, seated in the center of a long table (as in Da Vinci's "Last Supper," but devoid of apostles), facing the camera while he eats from a feast spread out before him. Christ, as played by Rockets Redglare, is dressed in a white tunic, wears glasses and a crown of thorns, but also has obvious stitch wounds circling his neck (an allusion to the apostle Paul or John the Baptist?), and is eating from a huge turkey drumstick or similar cut of meat. The entire sequence basically consists of jump cuts (of varying speeds) of Christ eating in a purposely very messy manner, dribbling wine down his chin, at times spitting what looks like coleslaw from his mouth, and throwing denuded drumsticks out of frame. During this the soundtrack blends the aforementioned music with a collage of various parts of a church service (semi-incomprehensible noise except for the occasional hallelujah), which eventually segues into a sermon (the content of which is an assertion of Christ's true virility against the image of Christ as "a sissy holding a little billy goat or lamb"). The sequence cuts back once to Kasso attempting to get past the body guard, then back to Christ finishing his meal and having a cigarette, at which point the sequence concludes.

#### **IV. Hell**

This final sequence is the hardest to decode both visually and aurally, as a dense sound collage takes over the soundtrack and the quality of the visual track is often inconsistent, sometimes washed out, sometimes muddy. Kasso's character also disappears as a unifying thread; he is visible from time to time, but in general the sequence is very chaotic. The set for the Hell section was an abandoned warehouse in lower Manhattan that happened to contain a full size train locomotive, which is featured prominently throughout the sequence. One or two establishing shots are utilized at the beginning of this section, but for the most part the camera is

unsteady and subjective. At the beginning of the sequence, established in a long, high shot, various denizens of hell are running around the warehouse space or clambering over the locomotive. These demons are all dressed in some type of costume, usually a mask (a black fetish-type hood with horns, a ram's head, a Leatherface-style plastic mask), with some being dressed as bikers or other generic "bad" types. As fires burn around the warehouse space, three victims are tied by their ankles, upside down, to the locomotive and are being tortured in various ways by the hellions. A group of "normal" looking people (the Satan Teens?), Kasso among them, rush in from one side of the warehouse and wrestle with the torturers, only to be subdued. From this point on, it becomes very difficult to distinguish one character from another unless they are distinguished by a mask, as the contrast is very high and features are hard to make out. Likewise, the actions of the group are hard to distinguish as the sequence wears on, one not being sure who is being tortured and who is willingly submitting. One hellion starts fires only to have another extinguish them immediately with a fire extinguisher; at one point bikers whip a body, wrapped like a mummy, hanging by hands and feet from the ceiling. A circus strongman lifts a barbell with one hand while a shirtless man caresses him and twists his flesh in a homoerotic display. A woman and baby in a stroller appear, and are "terrorized" by the demons; we glimpse Kasso from time to time but cannot be sure of his reaction to or role in the confused actions. Explosions occur, smoke billows. Amongst these shots of chaos are interspersed shots of the Devil on his throne (Coleman still dressed in his antique clothes); these shots obviously are intended to share the same space as the larger warehouse shots, but we never see the Devil in the larger shots, only in these inserts. The Devil mugs, smokes a cigar, and at one point geeks either rats or mice (another touch from Coleman's performance art) that are served to him on a silver

platter by a demented butler. The average shot length decreases as the sequence progresses, with no particular discernable ordering; the sequence climaxes with an upside-down long shot of the Devil on the bridge trestle combusting in reverse (the shot is run backward), sucking smoke and sparks back into his chest cavity, after which clear leader runs for a few seconds, capped by a final shot of what appears to be the moon, shot through glass or haze. The soundtrack accompanying this section is equally chaotic, a collage incorporating screams, voice performance (perhaps Diamanda Galas), speed altered spoken word, and industrial music.

The film could be seen as very un-Wojnarowicz like, at least in terms of his work up to the point of his collaboration with the Transgression movement; his earlier work is almost always subjectively, rather than factually, based, and concentrates on tropes of desire and sublimation rather than overt violence. The film also does not fit easily into the Transgression genre either, as most (of what I have seen, admittedly little in terms of the overall output of the period) deal with sexual perversity and violence in a very one-dimensional, cartoon-like, in-your-face way; all content works in the service of shock value. Like Wojnarowicz's site-specific public art, Transgression as a genre is concerned with the (transgressive) act *qua* act, with narrative either minimal, as in Kern's work, or parodic, as in Nick Zedd's early films. Given this, his work as a performer during this period, in two films by Richard Kern, *You Killed Me First* and *Stray Dogs* (a section of the longer *Manhattan Love Suicides*), fits much more easily into what one would expect from a collaboration between the "peripheral" Wojnarowicz and the punk/no-wave influenced Transgression movement. In the first film, Wojnarowicz plays an overbearing, autocratic father (a milder parody of his own) in a series of short scenes about a nuclear family

with a punk daughter headed toward destruction due to the parents' unrelentingly hypocritical attitudes (performance artist Karen Finley plays the mother). The film ends with the violent murder of the family by the daughter, but the tone of the film is one of parody and derision, with purposely grating, over-the-top performances. In *Stray Dogs*, Wojnarowicz plays a hustler infatuated with an artist (Bill Rice) who picks him up on the street, takes him home, ignores his sexual advances and derides Wojnarowicz until he very literally comes apart from desire (blood leaks from his neck, his arm explodes off his body and then oozes on the floor next to his prostrate body), whereupon the artist simply laughs and begins sketching the scene. Both films deal with the effects of repression and desire, and both contain the bitter enmity toward hypocrisy that marks most of Wojnarowicz's work, but unlike *Where Evil Dwells*, the violence is always contained to a degree by the weaker of Transgression's generic elements, camp, or self-parody.

This is not to say that *Where Evil Dwells* is not also shallow in terms of depth of critique, nor is it to valorize "depth" over "shallowness;" the Transgression movement as a whole is perhaps a response in kind to a very shallow social situation (the Regan presidency, the renewed conservative post-70's backlash of cultural institutions), to a one-dimensional world picture. The very topic of the film today seems semi-ludicrous (Satanic cults operating in the suburbs?), but in the historical context it was responding to ludicrous accusations from the right (the general panic over Satanism and "ritual abuse" that swept the country and, in particular, the hysteria surrounding heavy metal groups, evidenced in the infamous Judas Priest trial where supposed backward masking on one album was blamed for the suicides of two fans). What does set *Where Evil Dwells* apart is that it is a response to a real event, which gives it a more specific political critique; being anchored in the real world, the film allows Wojnarowicz to move beyond

transgression for transgression's sake. In the following section, I will try to briefly trace how the film incorporates Wojnarowicz's earlier influences into a (albeit embryonic, compared to his late work) politically motivated film that also attempts to deal with the pre-history of Transgression as a genre; he accomplishes this via the aforementioned dialectic of concealment and revelation, but adds to it the element of history, leading to a new political and social (as well as formal) depth in his concurrent and future work in other media.

Given that *Where Evil Dwells* is a departure from, or exists peripherally to, the Transgression movement as a whole, it also contains many elements that are very specifically influenced by Wojnarowicz's personal history and earlier works. The cynical, ironic Howdy-Doody puppet is a good example of this, a clichéd symbol representing his general distaste for the 1950's and the "normalizing" values that he felt were instituted during that period but were carried on, unexamined (or concealed under new rhetoric) into the 1980's. Wojnarowicz's childhood experiences made him very ambivalent toward the family unit and suburban life. He says,

If you look back over the decades at what people grew up in - people still have this idea that America was once a place, back whether it was in the 50's or whatever, that somehow had this cohesive sense of family, all that. ... You know, the nuclear family is probably the tiniest minority in the United States. ... It's like a tiny minority of people in power that hold up this illusion of this cohesive family structure and whatever, that they can still get away with holding up those traditional family values. It's like it hasn't existed in decades. (Sergeant 144)

The film functions, although not necessarily on a deep level, as a critique of this image of 1950's values and the hidden, decrepit side of suburban life; it turns the hysteria generated on the right against itself by adding realistic elements, by taking the reactionary worst-case-scenario of youth

gone wrong paranoia seriously and playing it out to its nth degree (a technique employed by Luther Price, against fundamentalist responses to AIDS, in his film *Sodom*). Wojnarowicz's portrayal of religious belief also reflects his personal past, his heaven a promise of unending plenitude (the huge feast laid out before Christ) that remains an impossible tease, an illusion that serves only as an instigator of desire without the possibility of fulfillment. Of his relation to Catholicism, Wojnarowicz says, "I was in a Catholic school for a year, which was really sadistic... I mean, I could find myself in school situations where it was so extreme and sadistic and violent, you know, that colored any view of organized religion I had after that" (Sergeant 139). This is only to trace a few of the aspects of David's life that converge in this work; it is not to suggest that they are critically examined through that work (exactly the opposite, they are the least critical of all the elements of the film). Wojnarowicz's portrayal of religion often overlooks any positive aspects, substituting dogmatic belief for any possibility of true faith (his friend Fran Lebowitz found his anti-religion stance paranoid).

Wojnarowicz's high art influences are also present in the film, perhaps one reason that it differs aesthetically from other Transgression era works that deny any relation to artistic pretension. One example of this is his portrayal of the criminal/victim relation in the film, a portrayal that owes much to Wojnarowicz's own ambivalence, inherited from Genet. In Querelle and *Un Chant d'Amour*, Genet presents the perpetrator/victim relation as an endlessly complicated one, where both parties are imbricated in a final outcome through some sort of (perhaps unnamed) mutual desire. In *Where Evil Dwells*, Wojnarowicz is attracted to both the plight of the criminal and of his victim. Kasso was, like Wojnarowicz, a teen abandoned by his suburban environment, forced into a nomadic homeless existence. In the victim (Lauwers)

Wojnarowicz finds the figure of abjection that often drew him to portraying victimization of various kinds. He states that

I'm extremely sensitive to any kind of physical or psychological distress present in other people. I've been like that my whole life. ... I was describing to somebody when I was in my late teens, trying to explain to them how I saw the world. ... I said something like we could both walk down one street together and at the end of that walk you'll probably come away remembering these flowers on this sill, the clouds in the sky. ... That you'll see all these images and you'll recall all these images and I'll see the maggots in the bum's leg" (Sergeant 143).

Wojnarowicz saw a world view as being founded in personal, sensorial experience, and his role as an artist was to work at uncovering buried histories in the service of creating a multiplicity of experiential, visual paradigms through which the world could be experienced. His portrayal of the Kasso/Lauwers relation in Where Evil Dwells is realistic not in that it attempts to offer a neutral view of the crime, but indeed, in positing the impossibility of a neutral, moral view, to mark, with ambivalence, the dialectic of concealment and revelation (which, for him, boils down to a priority of one visual reality over and against another).

It is in said dialectic that the film marks a moving forward for Wojnarowicz's stylistics; the film can be read, through this dialectic, materialized as a concern for the infernal, for the buried history, as an analogy for Transgression's generic position. If we accept Transgression as an extension (or underground rhizome) of a more general genre or movement in film history, which we will label Exploitation film making, and whose genealogy runs from the era of attractions and the fairground exposition to its baroque parodist (and major Transgression influence) John Waters, then *Where Evil Dwells* is aware of this generic history of Transgression and utilizes it to make a critique of media in its general, selective vision (the purposeful obfuscation of certain histories in favor of others). How does this reading function? The film

moves, generally speaking, on a dual track, from initial clarity (the real event) to final concealment (the fantastic imaginary) but, in a double movement, makes most clear what has been most concealed.

The dual tracks the film moves along, in terms of critique, are, on the macro level, a critique of the “suburban world view,” and, on the molecular level, an exegesis of Transgression as a genre. The film opens in the initial clarity guaranteed by the status of the beginning; we come to the film with certain generic expectations, some socially conditioned (the suburban world view) and others aesthetically so (expectations of what a Transgression film is or will be). This initial clarity is indicated by Wojnarowicz in his choice of title sequence, the spray-painting of *Where Evil Dwells* on the Plexiglas surface, a clarity which also reads as obscuring, for it is illusionistic (the suburban background and the text collapse into one visual field), but also clarifying, for he reveals the process of the illusion through it’s doing (he stands in front of the camera with a spray can, rather than employing stop-motion or another technique that would have completed the illusion). The film is subtitled “The Trailer,” which, along with the cynical Howdy-Doody puppet, clarifies what is to be expected aesthetically (a concomitant of attractions on the one hand, the disillusioned Transgression “world view” on the other) just as this same form (the trailer versus a full length film) obscures the larger project as a whole, which would be narratively more cohesive and less hermetic.

In the second section of the film, which portrays the crime, Wojnarowicz links the suburban world view (via its product Kasso) and the Transgression genre (figured as the criminal act itself, the unalloyed attraction of the extended, bloody murder sequence) with a buried history, namely the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century shock and attraction. He accomplishes this through his

choice of materials for intercutting with the “realistic” portrayal of the murder: the rollercoaster, the Devil, and wounded nature. The rollercoaster provides a link to an experience of early 20<sup>th</sup> century shock which also doubles as entertainment; as a visual element, it gives the murder sequence it’s thrill, as we experience in first person a simulation (effected also by the quick cutting) of the rapid acceleration and disorientation of which the rollercoaster itself was an arbiter for its age (the rollercoaster as infernal absorber/producer of the shock of railroad time). The figure of the Devil here is linked to the era through two connections: his dress and the explosive act he performs. While his dress is already commented upon in the film description, the infernal spectacle he performs is linked to the 19<sup>th</sup> century via the artist playing the Devil, Joe Coleman. Coleman was charged, after a Boston show at BFVF, during which he performed a self-explosion similar to the one portrayed in the film, with “being in possession of an infernal machine,” a statute that, according to the artist, has not been employed against anyone since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, the act has metaphorical significance for the portrayal of the crime (the crime as a beautiful and incendiary self-destruction), but it also links a certain kind of performance (an act-based, vaudevillian style) with the action portrayed and with its generic expectations (Transgression in general as an extension and perversion of the vaudevillian performance, outside of its era of possibility). The final element, wounded nature, symbolized in the flapping injured bird and maggot-ridden dog, suggests the general imbrication of both of these industrially based amusements (the rollercoaster, the infernal machine) with the elimination of an essentialist notion of the natural. The intercutting of these elements with the realistic portrayal of the murder itself suggests that the criminal act is instigated or accelerated by these forces while working, at the same time, to conceal them (just as the amusements themselves

perpetuate industrial shock in an effort to master such experiences).

The Heaven section of the film, following directly on the criminal act, suggests that the success of the work of concealment leads to an image made safe at the expense of possibility. Heaven here is a zone of absolute fulfillment (the unending table of food before Christ) that cannot be obtained, only observed (Kasso must stay in the antechamber, in a position that guarantees both desire and continual plentitude via the concealment of his criminal body). This can be read as a disavowal on the part of legitimate imagery (say, the legitimate film world against “exploitation” in general) to address the criminal kernel that founds and propagates it - the body of Christ appears full (the head sewn back on) but the imagery, like the soundtrack, is monotonous and repetitive (we see only shot after shot of Christ eating, hear only hallelujahs). That this is the shortest segment of the film is no surprise, as both Wojnarowicz and Kasso reject this memorialization of the image in favor of an active, revelatory participation with the image (even though it might lead to suffering). Heaven here serves as a thin veneer of concealment (the illusion of being able to forever satiate desire) over and against the broken, chaotic (yet accessible) plentitude of fragmentation, Hell.

The Hell section of the film references many symbols of Transgression’s imagistic history as well as revealing the submerged history of Wojnarowicz’s suburbs as the history of industrial shock and industrial time. The various denizens of hell can be read as emblematic of unique categories of attraction within the context of the genealogy of Transgression as a movement: occultism (the ram’s head), fetish (the demon with S&M hood), erotic or homoerotic display (the strongman and his companion), the horror film (man wrapped like mummy), the “moral danger” film (which *Where Evil Dwells* is itself a parody of, but represented here by the mother with baby

stroller harassed by teen-age demons), the biker/outlaw/rebel film (the two leather-clad bikers), the slasher film (demon with hockey mask, demon with Freddy Krueger-like handpiece), the camp film (transvestite demon). The Devil, still dressed in pseudo-dandy's garb, can be viewed as the father of all these generic babies, and represents a nexus of the pleasures of modernism and industrial shock. This figure holds the promise of industrial experience, the light-bringer in Anger's understanding of Lucifer; this possibility is figured earlier in the film, in the thrill of the rollercoaster that is crosscut during the murder sequence, in the combustion performance that Coleman performs as the Devil, where he becomes fire and light while remaining corporate - Lucifer as a symbol of the body transformed by the modern, allowed to experience new sensations. The dangerous, darker aspects of industrial experience, those concealed to smooth out a positive narrative space for technology, reside at this later point in the film. When the Devil geeks the rats, it points to a practice that disturbs not only because it serves as a link to an era with real rather than virtual spectacles (the "origin" of modern visual language at/as the carnival sideshow attraction), but because it reanimates what has become a distinctly industrial process (the commoditization of flesh as food); it is obscene not only because of its historical revelation, but because it points to a societal disavowal of a morally equivalent practice. The figure of the abandoned train engine also serves this kind of purpose, but in a more subtle way, suggesting the disavowal of a still unresolved problematic ("railroad time") that has been sublimated into new forms or technology (air travel, for example) - the railroad is now only a mockup of industrial shock, a rollercoaster, emptied of its metaphysical wonder. The general chaos of this segment stands against the false plentitude of the previous Heaven segment; Hell here is the sublimated history of the human becoming-machine, a chaotic fragmentation of the

visual practices that are the byproduct of the work of maintaining the dialectic of societal concealment and revelation. The emblem of this work, the ontological infernal machine here, is the loop or double movement, personified in this last section of the film as a demon continually in the work of lighting fires, followed by a demon continually extinguishing them.

Wojnarowicz begins, concurrent with *Where Evil Dwells*, to explore this same work of societal prestidigitation in other media; this marks what could be called the beginning of his “mature” style, in that he turns to more traditional media (acrylic on wood, masonite, or canvas) and framing while incorporating both the content and form appropriate to his interests in submerged history and industrial time. His main tactic is to take the emblems that he brandished as a street artist and behave as if they had a history as serious as any other relic; he then mixes these with modern relics and with “real” historical icons to generate a space that is both public and private, legitimate and sublimated, political and obscure. A good example of this is “Crash: The Birth of Language/The Invention of Lies” (1986) [fig. 13]. As in many paintings of this period, Wojnarowicz utilizes a dark, compacted symbol of post-industrial destitution (the crumbling city in the background, the crashed locomotive) to dominate the majority of the canvas - the burning hulk of the locomotive contains imagery of what the train had to “ride over,” in a sense, to reach its destination. The visuals inside and under the locomotive are all iconographic links to buried forces on both the singular and the universal level. On the singular level, the level of the individual, Wojnarowicz almost always portrays the concealed as being abject, personal suffering or trauma, but which is also depersonalized by being iconographic, without “real” referent: the man tied in the desert, being picked to death by vultures is a good example of this,

as is the burning building and the severed hand. On the universal level, his concern is with recurrences of the buried stories of certain peoples (of history), here referenced by the pueblo buildings, by the toppled column, by the small discarded totem, by the collage of trash, which reveals not only Wojnarowicz's revitalization of older personal concerns, but which also reveals his concerns to be atemporal in that he recognizes a concealment not only of past histories, but of present social history, as it is occurring (that is, he tries to convey his own society anthropologically). This type of content is present in a number of works from this period, including "Excavating the Temples of the New Gods" [fig. 14], "Late Afternoon in the Forest" [fig. 15], and "The Newspaper as National Voodoo: A brief history of the U.S.A." (all 1986) [fig. 16].

The form of his work during this time takes on, through his collage techniques, a kind of nodal montage element befitting his portrayal of industrialized time in *Where Evil Dwells*. This is somewhat apparent in "The Newspaper as National Voodoo," with one central figure, the voodoo doll, standing as interchange (via the capillaries) for a variety of visual impulses. Wojnarowicz begins to explore this technique in full with his elements series, "Water," "Fire," "Earth," and "Wind (for Peter Hujar)" [figs. 17-20]. In all of these, the element itself provides the visual ground, so to speak, with a nodal connective system suitable to each element's portrayal (a liquid, egg-sack like structure of images in "Water," a root network in "Earth," a thin, abstract symbol structure in "Wind"). This structure allows him to integrate his iconographic contents on a more cohesive basis, while simultaneously suggesting his newly developing philosophical sense for the interactions of types and events across historical milieu, made possible by post-industrial media. This impulse travels across media for Wojnarowicz; a

series of later photographically based works use montage to enunciate a political and sociological position (“The Weight of the Earth, Parts I and II”, as well as “Spirituality” and “Fever,” all 1988 [figs. 21-24]). This nodal system eventually becomes, in his later works, materially manifest, with images “wired” into systems of capital almost like microchips, as in “Bad Moon Rising” (1989) and “Fear of Evolution” (1988-89) [figs. 25 & 26]. While all these works do not necessarily partake in a specifically cinematic style, they all presuppose cinema as a mode of communication, as a paradigm for both layering and juxtaposing visual information and for uniting this information across a non-chronological, experientially based social space.

If, in the final years of his life, Wojnarowicz developed, across different media, a unification of methodology and interests, a mature artistic voice, this was perhaps achieved best in his writing. It is in his memoir, Close to the Knives, that Wojnarowicz unites all the issues of his visual art, subterranean or not, with an expression of his philosophy by way of his personal history. An experience of his writing is not necessary to an understanding of his work, but in explicating what cannot be expressed by purely visual means, his book lessens the sense of “shallowness” that accompanies some of Wojnarowicz’s work. Wojnarowicz’s contribution is strongest in this sense of personal history; for Wojnarowicz, the personal and the political are never divergent, the social and the individual are always in negotiation. He brings the weight of the social to the personal; the weight of a society that is made up of millions of obscured lives, lived without witness and without visual/aural/verbal exegesis. The relationship of the singular life to the dialectic forces of social history surrounding it, uncovered in its fundamentally erotic nature, and stripped bare of overarching pretensions to free will (an unwillingness to see the human as fundamentally non-animal), is at the basis of the relation of Wojnarowicz’s writing to

his visual production. It is in this regard, that is, in my inability to make manifest Wojnarowicz the philosopher, that an analysis of his art fails.

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