In London, March of 2008, media artist Raymond Salvatore Harmon staged the first screening/performance of his 49 minute contemporary occult cinema piece *Rites of Eleusis*. Based on the seven public rituals performed by British occultist Aleister Crowley in 1910 in Caxton Hall London, Harmon's seven, seven-minute-long visual distillations of Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis* represent a specific form of performance-based occult ritual. Utilizing the cinematic experience as a practical tool for conscious expansion, Harmon's work draws on a wide range of associative ideas: from the writings of alchemist Thomas Vaughan and the experimental films of Harry Smith to traditional Kabbalah and contemporary occult ritual. All of these concepts find themselves sharing the table with a vast array of hand-modified video electronics, circuit bent video signals, and live manipulated feedback. Beneath the apparent visual imagery Harmon utilizes the entire text of the original *Rites of Eleusis* as complex subliminal content.

Rites of Eleusis was presented as a 3-channel improvised video environment at Horse Hospital Gallery, London on March 7th 2008.

"These were her Instructions, which were no sooner delivered, but she brought me to a clear, large Light, and here I saw those Things, which I must not speak of."

-Thomas Vaughan from *Lumen de Lumine*.

"On the Nature of Light: The Cinematic Experience as Occult Ritual"
Raymond Salvatore Harmon, October 2008

Improvised cinema at its broadest definition is a form of filmmaking in which the visual element of the film (and potentially the audio as well) is created in a live context from scratch before the audience. Much akin to improvisational music forms like jazz and taqasim, improvised cinema covers such artistic forms as VJ performance, video circuit bending, and interactive installation environments.

Within the context of improvised cinema exists a specific form of creative filmmaking. Its roots are in the domain of the spiritual in so far as it is concerned with the practical application of the cinematic experience to the use of mystical attempts at the expansion of the conscious mind. Transcendental cinema codifies the cinematic experience into that of the ritual performance. Utilizing the paradigm of ritualized set and setting, it takes on the traditional role of spiritual ritual (ie, the mass, ceremonial magic, vodoun performance, tantric recitation, etc.) but pushes the traditional form into the cinematic realm.

This Transcendental Cinema is at its core the cinematic understanding of the use of spiritual content in relation to the context of its practical use as a device for controlling the state of our conscious mind. In a practical sense all film (or any cinematic experience)

changes our perceptions and alters our sense of the real. (For instance, we are constantly fooled into believing we are seeing motion instead of a series of still images.) This ability of the mind to reinterpret incoming data based on preconceived notions of reality (we interpret motion because what else could it be but motion?) gives us a clue to the function of Transcendental Cinema's mechaniques.

The human mind does not specifically relate reality to us. It alters the actual in order to give us the necessary information for our survival. Filtering data, the mind softens the edge of our world through various implementations of data flow. What cinema possesses is an ability to create a mental landscape, like a waking dream state, in which man can explore his desires and fears, fulfill its lusts and passions without conflicting with the 'real' world of his existence. Thus cinema gives us the ability to manipulate the emotional and mental state of the viewer.

From the beginning of film directors have sought to utilize this ability that film possesses in order to create an overwhelming cinematic experience for the viewer. Men like Eisenstein and Vertov developed basic formulas for implementing complex ideas via the cinematic model. Montage, rapid cut editing, disassociation between sound and visual input were tools utilized from the earliest days of films birth in order to propagate philosophic and political ideals and to explore forms of creative expression.

The means by which the transcendental film may affect our mind state is varied and can utilize iconic imagery, empathetic plot lines, and abstract imagery in conjunction with subliminal content, specifically chosen strobic effects, and color frequency rates to gain access to the architecture of the mind. Often attacking the perceptual input of our senses on multiple fronts, the transcendental film may act on the conscious and subconscious mind simultaneously. It may distract the conscious mind while accessing the subconscious in order to deliver various sets of information that modify the viewer's sense of the real. Pushing the mind outward beyond the normal state of awareness, the transcendental film possesses the ability to confront our latent ideas of reality and to alter our perceptions of the now.

A practical example of the transcendental (or occult) film whose purpose is the practical exploration of the transcendental state is my work, *The Rites of Eleusis*.

Based on the seven public rituals performed by British occultist Aleister Crowley in 1910 in Caxton Hall London, *The Rites of Eleusis* are seven, seven-minute-long visual distillations of Crowley's rites representing a specific form of performance-based occult ritual. The primary visual content of the pieces are evolving abstract patterns and structures. The developing visual forms are manipulated live via various video signal feedback loops and circuit bending the video processors signal path.

The practice of circuit bending is one of improvisation within the context of a piece of electronic hardware's ability to function. At it simplest circuit bending is the act of opening up a piece of hardware and short-circuiting various pieces inside the device to change the path through which the video signal flows. Any device may have thousands or more simple connections that can be made to alter the input and output signal. By experimenting with a device before hand, and then hardwiring a set of switches that create multiple combinations of a set of points in the circuitry of the device, the performer is given a much wider ranging brush with which to explore the nature of the video signal path.

Similarly the video feedback loop is a constantly flowing input and output of the same source, taking the output of a chain of devices and feeding it to the first device as the primary input. As the signal feeds through the devices it is altered by various color and signal distortions via circuit bending. Constantly feeding out and back into itself the signal evolves through the slightest movements of the various controls of the video devices in the feedback chain.

My first transcendental film, *YHVH*, was created using a simple video feedback loop with a vcr, digital still camera in display mode, and a television set. The process of creating the developing content through experimentation yielded approximately 6 hours of material. I edited this down to the 22 minutes of the piece. This type of exploration of the video path yields a landscape-like field of

shifting forms that perfectly translates for use as a trigger to access the subconscious mind. When manipulated correctly the strobic forms and shifting fields of distorted video feedback provide a perfect canvass on which to edit the various texts and instructions of a given occult ritual.

Beneath the apparent visual imagery *Rites of Eleusis* utilizes the entire text of Crowley's original *Rites of Eleusis* as complex subliminal content. This text content is masked in various ways in the visual field, and it is often shown for as little as 1/30th of a second to the viewer. The words are placed in specific locations in the visual field that maximize the human eye's distinct pattern of response to movement and color.

The text can be scaled to emphasize specific passages, certain phrases may be repeated or moved around in the visual field. This type of design element within the subliminal content is common in the world of advertising and marketing. Even in contemporary society, the written word is a powerful element in all mystical and philosophic traditions. We take an oath on a book, venerate the writings of certain people, store our collective knowledge and express the nature of the human condition in the written word. William Burroughs once said that language is a virus, and its power over the formation of our thoughts is indisputable.

During the development of a transcendental film, careful control of color frequency, tonal range and strobic rate are taken into consideration. Using vectorscopic and waveform analysis of the video content each frame is examined and tuned to be in harmony with the maximum desired effect of accessing the subconscious mind. Each edited frame is processed to be in tune with the mind's native response curve to specific color range and light sensitivity. All of this works in conjunction with the subliminal content of the text in order to create the maximum impression on the mind.

Though the subliminal content is developed in a controlled studio setting, the primary visual content of the piece is dramatically performed in a live context through various electronic devices. Utilizing video circuit bending and pushing the primary signal through a set of feedback loops, the content is responsive to the environment of the performance.

The improvisational nature of the performance is such that it becomes a feedback loop of socio-emotional energy. Almost everyone has experienced the feeling of group emotion, at a music concert, at church, at a rally for some political ideal. The atmosphere of any performance is charged with the positive and negative emotional content of the audience. The best performers feed off of this energy and channel it into their creative path. As the transcendental film unfolds and the audience is drawn into the content the performer is feeding off of the content being developed and the charge of the audience. A much larger feedback loop occurring between he viewer, the performer and the content, which parallels the feedback loop of the video content.

The practical side of the performance from a viewer standpoint is that the participants in the production (the audience members) are able to view the development of the piece live. Standing at a distance in front of and facing the screens, the performer (me) guides the audience on a journey through the mental landscape of the subconscious mind.

In any transcendental cinema screening or performance careful attention must be made to set and setting. This is, after all, a ritual—and by its very nature the setting must be rarified and made to conform with the intent of the practice. Due consideration must be given to all of the variables of the environment of a piece. Sound levels, projector brightness, smell, ambient noise, audience comfort (or discomfort)—all things must be evaluated and taken into account in developing a production or staging a screening of a transcendental film.

The environment for the Horse Hospital performance was that of an actual cobble-stone-floored horse hospital from the 1700s. Its wooden pillared environment created a framework for the setting of the piece. In the center of the room was a ritual circle with a hexagram (seven pointed star) inside, each with an alchemical symbol representing a planet of the classic system. Above the circle were the three screens in a half circle to the rear of the hexagram. Opposite the screens inside the triangle was the altar, on which the various video pieces were placed.

The three screens each had their own projector, with the center screen carrying the primary signal containing the subliminal and primary visual content, and the outer two screens being a feed from the content on the center screen through the video electronics on the altar. This allowed for the creation of a live moving shape that develops out of the primary content in relation to the audiences response to the film.

The audience entered from the rear of the room. Chairs were placed in rows facing the screen, much like a traditional film screening. But the chairs flanked both sides of the circle, leaving the altar and performer (myself) standing in front of the audience like a conductor.

The sound of a given piece can be a prepared audio document or performed live either improvisationally or from a prepared score. Within the context of *Rites of Eleusis* all of the sonic content is derived from minutely abstracted samples of Aleister Crowley's recorded voice. Tiny fractions of his incantations are manipulated in order to bring about a sense of immersion within the visual field. This utilization of sound in order to heighten the visual stream or edited content of film is nothing new. The emotional content of almost all contemporary cinema utilizes the score to develop the underlying depth or urgency of a given scene. Horror films in particular use the soundtrack to heighten the anxiety and tension of the viewer. Often building up the emotional content in order to direct the viewer's attention to the upcoming scenario of the plot.

The historic antecedents for this type of emotional manipulation in order to force states of enlightenment can be traced from both eastern and western sources. It is commonly understood that the Eleusian and Dionysian rites of ancient Greece both utilized staged performance as part of the initiatory rites of their cults. The initiate was led through caverns with staged events being performed theatrically by actors that reenact certain mythological parables and heighten the participant's often drugged mental state to that of religious experience.

Crowley's *Rites* used the classic form of the Eleusian Mysteries to demonstrate very contemporary forms of theatrical practices—the musical and dance improvisations, the placing of the Magus within the triangle of invocation. Much of Crowley's *Rites* foreshadows the works of Artuad and Growtowski in its form and approach to the theater as a religious experience. His expansion of the theatrical form of ceremonial ritual magic led to a broadening of interest in theater as spiritual exploration of self.

Much in the way Crowley expands on the classic form of initiatory ritual, my *Rites of Eleusis* deconstructs the theatrical performance, approaching the audience with a much more advance set of tools for expanding mental perceptions and accessing the subconscious. Abandoning the theatrical in favor of the immersive installation, *Rites of Eleusis* approaches the mind of today's audience with the level of data input it has come to expect from its experiential existence. By placing the participant in a field of sensory input control, the mind state that leads one to the path of understanding can be achieved.

As the cinematic experience has infiltrated contemporary culture as the dominate form of story telling in modern society the individual viewer has become callous to the more subtle forms of theatrical presentation. What could once be achieved through simple stage acting must be done at a much higher and interactive level with the average contemporary mind. Video games, the internet, social networking tools, mobile phones that do everything are examples of technology that operates at this heightened level. It's not just our children who have these technologies and use them everyday. We do as well. Thus the natural role of the theatrical in the mystical/spiritual experience must evolve with society's demand for high resolution and data rate.

The transcendental film as a performance-based art is simply the next generation in society's approach to understanding the unknown within the mystical paradigm. We have as a species sought out more access to knowing, to illumination in all its forms. Thus the use of cinematic models for the presentation and practical exploration of the mystical state is merely a parallel to our modern forms of understanding the everyday.