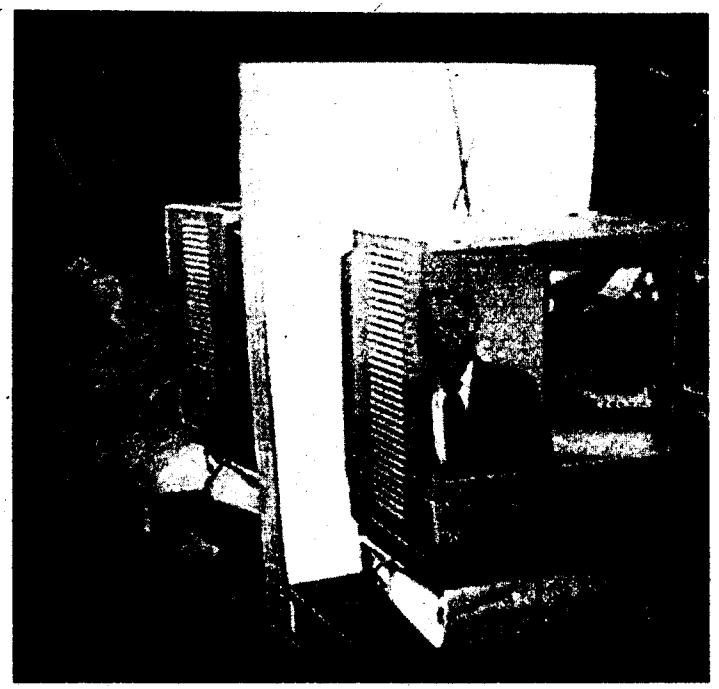


Space Invaders *(1982)*

VIDEO ART AND VIDEO GAMES

AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH BARRY

BY PETER LEHMAN

PL: What is the connection between being a videomaker and your current interest in video games?

JB: My work has always been concerned with a form of spectatorship. In my earlier work I was involved in performance. In *Kaleidoscope*, I tried to involve the audience in the construction of a narrative by actually getting them to participate in certain ways. This piece was constructed very loosely out of soap opera fragments. It was done in 1977 at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco and shown every day at noon for two-and-a-half weeks. Every day I would vary the order of certain modules, the units out of which the piece was constructed, and I would try to draw on the same audience--in other words, try to get them to repeat the viewing experience. Each time *Kaleidoscope* was performed it would have a different outcome because the various parts of the piece functioning together in a different order would produce a different resolution in the minds of the spectators. That kind of interest then, is carried over into the types of videotapes I actually make. Also, I think my work has always been very much involved with questions concerning the kind of subject that is constructed by film and video. I'm fascinated by how the subject is constructed in video games, as I have been fascinated by the construction of subjectivity in other ways.

PL: In what way do you feel the viewer of *Kaleidoscope* is somehow completing the soap opera?

JB: Because in that particular piece we would get the same people over and over again. It was summer in San Francisco and the museum is located in an urban area, so we would get people who would repeat this viewing experience.

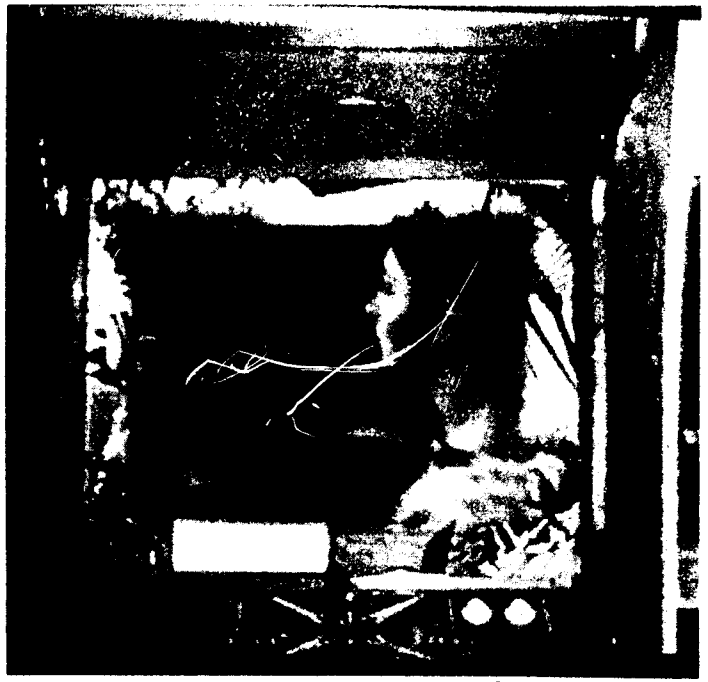
PL: Right, but what I'm asking is, does that make it a kind of game for them?

JB: Yes, in a way it was a kind of game. That's a good point. I never thought of it as a game. That's very interesting. Also it was 1977--a time when a lot of people,

myself included, wanted to be there and lead a discussion whenever we showed our work. That was seen as a very productive counterculture way of handling the dissemination of information and breaking down the elitist constructions of what art-making was. So this was very productive because afterwards we would all sit around and talk about the work.

PL: How do you see the subject as constructed in video games, and how would you relate that to some of the other more traditional forms of spectatorship?

JB: That's really a hard one. I wish I knew the answer. I think it is very, very different from the cinema. Initially, when I started to write a paper I wanted to talk about video games as desiring machines, and I thought I could use Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, particularly his rules for discourse, as a kind of strategy. So much of video games, how one plays them, is uncovering these rules for discourse and then situating oneself in the game vis-à-vis understanding how the subjects are positioned by this discourse. It's a cognitive relationship, but my thinking right now sees it as more complicated than, for example, the kind of primary/secondary processes involved in our current models of the cinema as dream and dream space in the way the spectator identifies with the dream and feels that he is dreaming the dream, and so forth. I do think there are aspects of that relationship in how we identify when we play video games. But there are other things going on too. When you read the cognitive psychological literature you can see the various filter-theory models of attention study certainly apply--that is, ideas about how one filters one extraneous bit of stimuli versus another. In video games you are bombarded by more stimuli than you can handle, but somehow you do learn to handle this by uncovering these rules for discourse. You learn where things are on the screens that you see, you learn how these various objects are going to bombard you. You are aided in doing so by the sound. In certain ways the sound carries more information about what's happening than the effects do because it gives you a cue that you can listen to, and you can thus hear when the next bombardment is going to come. It's a very complicated model.



Space Invaders *(1982)*

PL: Specifically, what do you feel about the way the machines are usually constructed in terms of how the player looks down on the screen and where the knobs are located?

JB: I think it's a private theater. A lot of other theaters were really mass theaters of a sort. In the Twenties, especially with the Italian Futurist theater, there was a real mechanization of people and a placement of people within the new cityscape. The idea of the theater then was that the city would be brought into the theater space. The theater was seen as a kind of collective expiation and was attempting to recover a dis-alienated space. I guess you have to go back to the function of theater. Almost all the way back, in the Grecian and even in the Elizabethan theater, there was a kind of essentialism about the theater experience where, no matter what the actors did, it was an essential activity. With much of the mechanical theater, the actor was replaced by a form of mechanics. You can see it in France's Jesuit theater of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and you can see it all the way through the one brand of theater history. I think by the time we get into the Twenties, which is when the Italian Futurist movement was going on, the theater had become a sphere wherein people were trying to recover the notion of the mass in some way which created a kind of reciprocity, a kind of *rapprochement* with a really alienated time. We know from people like Stuart Ewen that in almost every pre-industrialized or industrializing country, all the people were

VIDEO GAMES . . . trying to incorporate real questions about private theater, private spectacle and what spectacle means for mass culture.

very alienated. In the Italian Futurist movement you have people like F. T. Marinetti who in 1913 wrote a manifesto, *The Variety Theatre*, where he was trying to destroy the kind of theatricality, the alienation effect that had come to characterize the theater space, by making it even more alienating. Hugo Ball transformed himself, for example, into a marionette and into a mannequin. All of his theater really involves this type of transformation. Between 1913 and 1922, especially in Vsevolod Meyerhold's work, you can see there is this real *angst* being portrayed on the stage. There is all this noise and clanging and there are all these machines. The people are reduced to machines too. It's very alienating and very painful. It's not a celebration of this activity, it's more a lament.

PL: In these theaters you are talking about though, going all the way back to the Grecian and Elizabethan, are there important changes in the architecture of the theater in terms of the placement of the spectator in his or her line of vision to the stage?

JB: In Grecian times, for example, you have the amphitheater; in fact all of the models of the later theaters we are familiar with, such as the Renaissance theaters, of Palladio, are based on Vitruvian models of a Roman theater and before that a Grecian theater. In Palladio, for instance, the theater has five doorways which are set into perspectives so that the actor can be placed against this mechanized perspectival space. This part of the theater was not designed by him; it was designed by an architect named Scamozzi, who also designed another theater where, it is historically thought, the look of the king was inscribed. It was a look from high up, looking down into the theater space. Everyone else was positioned around that particular look. Everything in the theater was vantaged to a perspective based on a look which that particular king (who actually was a duke) enjoyed from the balcony of his palace. The designer of the theater, Scamozzi, had taken the palace and re-inscribed it within this theater space.

There are several other looks which were also being developed at the same time. The Elizabethan theater was a very democratic theater because it was based on bearbaiting and was a peasant form of entertainment. It was also an actor's theater. Acting was supreme and you had a look that was much more democratized, where the sightlines were much less hierarchical. You had a pit, usually, and then you had balconies, and they were all available to everyone. There were not even different price ranges for a long time, though it's hard to generalize. Then you also had this very interesting area above the top of the theater where people who wanted to be seen could sit. The theaters were two-tiered and there was a place where the musicians used to sit and, by paying an extra amount of money, you could actually sit above the theater. You couldn't see anything, but you could be seen by everyone.

PL: Above the stage?

JB: Yes. That was a very interesting way of organizing the theater. In the Palladio theater that I mentioned earlier, the best places to sit were actually in the very front row. That's where the nobility and royalty were supposed to sit; it was very similar to the best seats in church. So you had these three different kinds of theaters and three different ways in which sightlines and such were organized.

PL: In those early twentieth-century experimental theaters that you mentioned, was it just what was occurring on the stage that was changing or was there a change in the sightlines?

JB: Oh, yes, there was a definite change. There was a Gropius theater that's quite amazing because it's a giant spiral theater. It's actually a 360-degree theater and it encloses a total theater. The Italian Futurist movement in theater was asking, "Can we get the city back into the theater?" but actually the theater had already gone into the city. You can read it in the work of someone like Georg Simmel: this whole construction of the bourgeois subject, the way voyeurism and other forms of communication were inscribed within the subject, and the sort of alienation effect that was occuring among people. So there was an attempt to recover this alienated spectator within the confines of the theater and make a group, mass-shared event. Between about 1913 and 1922 the theater suddenly begins to celebrate technology as the saving grace of man, whereas earlier it had been trying to question technology. You can see it also in a play that Sergei Eisenstein did, called *Essay*. It was an experiment conducted between around 1911 and 1913. It was a very noisy, cacophonous play where sight gags and American comedy are interspersed with all these alienating effects from the city. You saw this destruction. It was an assault on the nervous system of the spectators. The play ended with firecrackers under the seats of the spectators.

PL: In a certain way do you see video games as some kind of an assault?

JB: In a way I think they are an assault. Although I see video games as being related to the history of the computer, and also trying to incorporate real questions about private theater, private spectacle

and what spectacle means for mass culture. There is the same sense of alienation but no longer is the city involved. The cities become totally removed. No one cares about the city; it's no longer an issue. Video games involve instead looking for the space industry, a longing for an imaginary world, an imaginary kind of existence. I see them as private theaters, private spectacular theaters. They are carefully designed architecturally to allow, to inscribe the look of the king, because you look down upon the screen, and they usually have great sound. I'm talking about coin-operated, not home-operated games. They also allow complete motor involvement of the spectator; it's tactile. Your hands are involved, your eyes are involved and you can also become involved in a kind of fantasy. For instance, in the rock opera *Tommy*, do you remember the deaf, dumb and blind kid who plays a mean pinball, who can do everything? That's the metaphor.

PL: What connection do you see between the pinball machine and the video game? In some ways the pinball machine also seems to inscribe the look from above, looking down, and you control it. It's mechanical rather than being computer oriented. It involves lights. There are certain obvious similarities. What do you see as the important similarities and differences between the two?

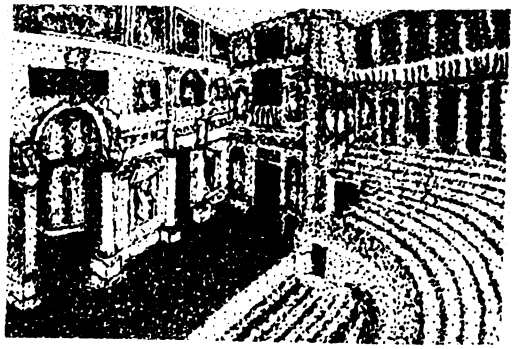
JB: They are really not so similar. In fact I notice that people who go to the arcades that have pinball machines and video games usually don't play both. It's mostly the older people who seem to play pinball machines.

In a new piece called *Space Invader* I am trying to explore the notion of the movie *Alien* as indicating a switch from *2001*, which I see as a kind of fear and cynicism inscribed in the way new pinball machines talk to you. They say, "Are you warrior enough to take me on?" Also, the piece reverses the implied technological relationship between showing someone operating a pinball machine or a video game, where you have this illusion that you are operating it, and showing that actually it's more coming out at you. Perspectively, the way you look down on a pinball machine really intrigues me. Imagine this machine being big; it looks like the lights of a city or the lights of something coming towards you. I think there is something really interesting about the way this is defined in a pinball game that is very different from video, and I haven't been able to articulate it.

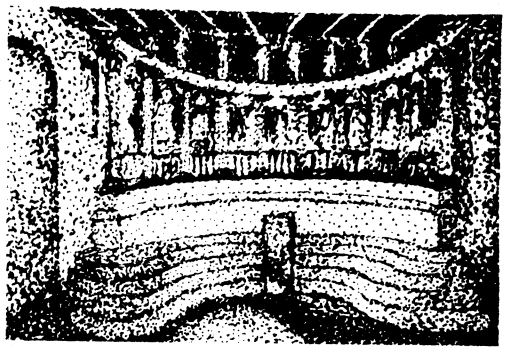
PL: Have you done any thinking about whether sexual difference plays an important part in video games? Is it your observation or are there any statistics to indicate if they are equally appealing to men and women? Can you relate it to the argument that in the Hollywood film there is not an equal access to pleasure for men and women, or that a woman's pleasure, insofar as she has access to it, is in many ways governed by adopting a certain kind of male pleasure?

JB: Yes. Video games were designed by men and the first ones were designed by people who felt disenfranchised by the killing off of the space program. The first game was designed in 1972 by Nolan Bushnell, a 29-year-old computer maverick who designed something called *Pong*. After *Pong*, in about 1974, he started Atari. I've been to Atari several times because it's so close to San Francisco, and every time I talk to the designers I ask, "Who makes the design decisions? How do you arrive at these particular games?" and they always tell me they design games that they like, that they would like to play. And when I say, "Why are they so violently warlike?" the answer I always get is, "Because I wanted to go into the space industry." So you see a kind of unconscious phantasm worked out in the games, and it is very interesting to have the opportunity to make your own. This is like somebody's unconscious construction brought to life—in a certain way more than (well maybe not more than) a film. But the games really do bear the stamp of just a very few men who designed them. Now they are branching out. Marketing is what brought about the change in the games.

Second Globe Playhouse: 1614-1644. London, England.



Olympic Theater, Venice, Italy.



Olympic Theater, Sabboineta, Italy.

Casual Shopper *(1980-81)*

Now, for example, you have games like *Pacman*. The early games were all destroyer games. To play them you had to decide that you were going to lose because you are not going to win. You only lose. It's a very cynical activity that you engage in and you are basically playing yourself.

PL: Is there any kind of special thrill in the moment of loss, and how do you interpret that?

JB: I think it's a primal situation and very primary processes are involved. For example, in *Defender*, which is my favorite, you have a shoot-'em-up game where you can go forward and backward and explode bombs, and you have hyper space, smart bombs and all those great little buzz words. In that game, the best effects you get are actually when you lose people or rescue them. With *Defender* you can get up to nine lives by going through numerous attack waves, so you are promised immortality by the machine. But when you lose people you get the best explosion–it goes through every color in the color wheel, one after the other, and it makes this incredible noise. It's very orgasmic, like the end of the world would be. I think the death wish, scopophilia and other pleasure-producing psychoanalytically-defined drives operate here.

PL: What would women have to do to somehow grab a space for themselves within that kind of representational system? Have you thought at all about what women's video would be like in comparison to this male fantasy of what makes the video game exciting?

JB: I think *Pacman* and *Ms. Pacman* have proved, in terms of market testing, to be very popular with women.

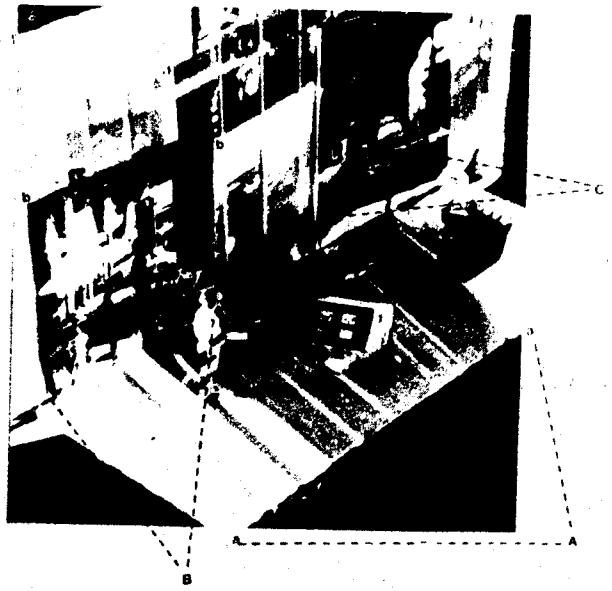
PL: But you have to be careful with that because some of the Hollywood films which most feminists would consider the most horrible are the ones many women would undoubtedly like the best. How might a video game look that escaped that kind of fantasy? Do you have any ideas about this or about what pleasures it would afford? Or is the whole concept somehow strongly tied in with these male fantasies?

JB: Well, I think the whole concept is tied in with mastery and control, and for women to even begin to play, an incredible leap must be made. Most women I know, for example, won't play; because it is so frustrating at first, they don't even try to play. A form of pop-psychology is being used to explain why *Pacman* appeals to women. The little monster, the little pac-person, is not aggressive and just gobbles dots. It only becomes aggressive when it eats a little blue dot and then it is aggressive for just a short while. Women supposedly don't like shoot-'em-up games,which might actually be true. The only game that I know of that has been designed by a woman is called *Centipede*. This is a maze game where a little centipede comes down and you get to shoot things at it; you try to kill the centipede but you can't. The centipede just keeps living and growing more heads.

There seems to be no allowable pleasure for women; it's not in the cinema either. The look is still the look of the man. The only area where I have done a significant amount of research on women's pleasure is in the area of fashion, and that is in trying to figure out what look the woman assumes when she sees herself in the mirror. She sees herself as another person. I disagree with the kind of binary thinking of someone like John Berger, who says the look she sees is always through the eyes of a male. I don't think that's true. I believe there is *a* third look which can be assumed and it's a look constructed through discourse.

PL: What is this third look? How can you look at yourself in the mirror other than how a man would look at you in terms of you deriving pleasure from that look? How does it escape the man's evaluation?

JB: I think you can separate out; I know I can do it for myself. This dominant look that is ascribed to the male has certain characteristics which are definable through discourse, which have been well defined. There's a look, a reading against



Model: In the Shadow of the City *(1983)*

the grain that I can assume, that's different than the dominant male look.

PL: If you were looking at yourself in the mirror now, in those clothes you have on, in that sweater and in those jeans, how would you read that against the grain? The aesthetic of jeans has a lot to do with how tight they are, how they reveal a certain type of buttocks, or whatever, which is valued because of a concern in our culture now with a particular body type. Can you somehow evaluate how those jeans look on you in ways having nothing to do with that aesthetic?

JB: It's not that this aesthetic would have nothing to do with it, but it would be different.

PL: How would it be different?

JB: I'm going to use another example. If you take the dominant ideas that women are constructed through fashion and that they are able to assume a variety of guises, then the woman is a sliding signifier who can be a number of different things. In other words, she can be sexy one minute . . . she's totally fragmented. I'm saying that this fragmentation of the body of a woman can be applied to various ways of looking at the woman. So then I can see myself dressed in a number of different ways, even in the same clothes, as looking a certain way, as assuming a certain enclosed persona. Now one of the problems with that is that it does not say much to the real body of the real woman.

PL: Are you saying that if you look at yourself in the mirror in a given fashion, you can read against the grain of being sexy, even if in some ways it is a sexy fashion? Sexy fashion is probably the wrong word because with women's clothes, all fashions are in a way sexy fashions. You could look at yourself and read it against the fact, even though you're granting that men would look at the same outfit and see sexuality?

JB: Yes, because I might feel differently in those clothes than sexy. For me it might have other overtones than simply sexy.

PL: In a way you're saying John Berger overlooks the fact that women can somehow consciously look at their image against the grain of the male look?

JB: I think that is invoked a lot, especially these days. I hold a number of different jobs. I work as a convention designer and planner in a downtown San Fransisco hotel and many times I wear a suit. I know I look a certain way in that suit. I know I look one way in that suit to certain men, and I know I feel and look another way to myself which is very different. Or to bring up something more obvious—my hair. I get questions from the men I work with about my hair, which they look at as messy and which I look at as being different and not messy. There is a paper by Kaja Silverman on *The Story of O* which is quite interesting. She talks through various discourses which she learns to speak but which she also assumes are immanent; thus she is set into place by these various discourses that are really performed as marks on her body. She learns to speak a language out of this discourse which is assumed within the diegetic structure of the book, if one can say that, to be spoken by O. Much is made of the preface because this book claims it is written by a woman and that's crucial to the development of O's enclosed consciousness. The woman's real body is marked and set into place in a very specific way and I think fashion does that to a greater or lesser extent, depending upon how the woman is able to construct a reading or discourse about herself against that or in relationship to that.

PL: Would the same question come up that comes up in film: "How important would such a discourse be?" There are really two questions, both of which have parallels in film. If we go back to any historical period in fashion, how many women are able to read against the grain? Didn't most women look at themselves in the way described by Berger? If one says one can read a Douglas Sirk film against the grain of melodrama, the fact of the matter is that our mothers may very well have read them in a totally different way. Wouldn't it be true that most women are not reading their bodies and their fashions against the grain?

. . . In the video games you lose Cleveland, you lose your hometown, you die, you're reborn again.

JB: Yes, I think that's true but I think this question brings up another question, which is the whole relationship of oppositional practices to social change. How is it, especially in the culture we live in, that people change? It is very interesting: there have been some real changes in the last ten years which have affected women incredibly, and yet in many ways no one has really analyzed the effects of these changes upon women. I'm thinking of the number of women in the job market, the way realtionships in the family are carried out, both of which have to do with representational forms in a very real way that is obvious, yet not theorized in the sense of representational strategies with far-reaching consequences.

PL: Perhaps this relates to the second point I was going to make. How politically significant is it, for example, if you walked down the street right after having looked at yourself in the mirror and read the look against the grain? You're walking down the street, going to your job--the very situations you're describing--and you know everyone else is looking at you, not reading against the grain. So if there is another way for you to read the jeans you have on, other people are still reading them in this other way. How important would the third look be, if there is such a third look? Would you see that as being potentially important to change?

JB: I don't mean it is *the* third look, but that there are many other ways of looking that are possible. I am not talking about a unified look of the kind identified with the cinematic apparatus, but more about the possibilities for the look *if* it can break with the representational straight-jacket in which it is inscribed. One way for this to occur, and one way in which it cuts across class lines, is in the area of fashion. Of course, this is also the area in which women have been most dominated by the male gaze. So one question that always circulates around fashion is can the domination identified with fashion be subverted and reappropriated by or through a radical form of feminism or is it automatically and immediately recuperated on every level; from say Madison Avenue and further as a kind of reinternalization of 'patriarchial' values.

PL: I want to go back to video games for a minute. Is there another possible analogy between video games and cinema in the following way? It's been argued, as you know, by many people, that there is something about the apparatus and the conditions of projection--hiding the projector in a separate room where it is quiet, watching the film in the dark and so forth --that is crucial to invoking a particular psychoanalytic response to watching the cinema. If I understand what you are saying about video games correctly, regardless of how the game may be re-programmed to move away from certain masculine fantasies, isn't it true that the structure of the apparatus, the look you describe of the king looking down, the mastery and control which one tries to invoke with the various buttons and everything, would still be in place? Is that somewhat analogous to the apparatus in cinema in that even if we change what's on the screen, an argument could be made that we're still dealing with something very masculine, something which would automatically invoke structures of pleasures involving control?

JB: Oh, I agree. I think that's very much the case and I think that's why it appeals to men more than women. In essence, I see the apparatus as very similar to the cinema apparatus, although it is also quite different because it is so privatized.

PL: How do you compare that privatization to, say, early peep shows?

JB: I believe there is a similarity; there is a form of voyeurism. The arcades enjoy a pretty nefarious reputation. They are not thought to be socially "good" objects by the majority of people: a lot of small towns have legislated not to have arcades. There is a kind of scopophilia, and the pleasure that is invoked is looked down upon by the rest of society as being perverse or possibly addictive. Pinball is not looked down upon in the same way that video games are. I think of video games as being in their infancy, and probably they are going to change. If you look at the games played at home with groups of people, a lot of them are very well liked by women; they're fantasy games where you go on a quest for something. And they are trying to develop interactive video, transistors and micro-processors which would allow real user input into the game, which is not the case now. When I met with the people at Atari they kept saying, "Imagine what we could do, because we want to affect people emotionally, and just think what we would want to do." Now they are talking about renovating all the theaters and making them real pleasure palaces. But it seems to me that if there were some group sport activity that people could go to the movie theaters to do, such as a giant video game, they would go. You would pick which group of fighters you might want to be affiliated with, and who knows, you could have controls on your seat.

PL: You mean the audience would participate against each other?

JB: Yes. I'd love to write the program. It would be this fantasy palace where people could go. I am kidding. I think that the pleasure video games provide is more intense than the pleasure provided by going to the movies, although it is a different pleasure, it is not yet narrative.

PL: In the past people have always argued that these most important pleasures have been bound up, in our culture, not only to narrative, but also to realism. How do you see the relationship of the video game pleasure to the question of pleasure in realism?

JB: Again I think it goes back to a primary process of mastery and control. It is almost like the *fort/da* game which Freud talks about, where the child throws something away and can get it back, because in the video games, you lose Cleveland, you lose your home town, you die, you're reborn again. The fantasy you enter into occurs on a very primary level because it's all special effects. It's very different from Christian Metz' article, "*Trucage* in the Cinema," where the effects are said to work because they are not seen as extra-diegetic (although I would argue that in most films they are). Imagine that when you lost Cleveland you saw realistic effects. It would shake you out of your fantasy and you would become discombobulated. The impression of total reality would never work in the video game.

PL: Is this an important shift in the history of twentieth-century culture? For example, in *Star Wars* and that group of films, part of the immense pleasure comes, without a doubt, from the fact that the untraveled areas of space are now represented with such realistic detail that you can believe in the wars, the visits to the planets and so forth. Are there any other instances you can think of in twentieth-century culture that point to the type of pleasure you're talking about now where mastery and control would actually be lessened by a representational realism coming forward? It seems like a reversal. I don't know if you consider video games a mode of representation or not. When you say Cleveland, you have to, and yet on the other hand, this is a mode of representation where the most intense pleasures would be denied you if they were given "realistic" representation.

JB: I think in the case of video games, they are definitely working on more and more realistic representation, but in video games it's all special effects. It's like the difference between *2001* and *Star Trek*. In *Star Trek* the effects really occur extra-diegetically and they are jarring, whereas in *2001* since the whole thing is over-scale models you really are sutured, even though you are removed, into the shots in a very different way.

Space Invaders *(1982)*

PL: You are saying that in *Star Trek* you felt this effect came about because of the pattern of cutting back and forth, going from closeups of people talking and looking at each other to cutaways of the effects?

JB: Right. They would be literally talking in the cabin and there would be a cutaway to space-ship travel just like the television show. So it was a sort of over-drawn television show. Plus the effects, the mattes in that film were atrocious—the worst I have ever seen. But in terms of other kinds of pleasures, against realism, I can't think of any that are quite like that.

PL: I can't either.

JB: It is, I think very much an anti-impression of the reality machine so far, although the video programmer/developers are seriously trying to make it much more realistic. They are really stuck with the kind of pixilated representation, even in coin-op, where it is impossible for them to move into another kind of animation. It's computer graphics; it doesn't compare to Disney. That's a real problem with the special effects of videos. I think video games occupy a different place in the culture than they are given credit for, and if you go talk to the Atari people, it's Sixties idealism reborn. They can't wait until all the factories are robotized. They love their jobs, want everyone to love their jobs, and feel work should be like play, which also goes back to ideas about Italian Futurism. I guess it was Meyerhold who noted that in work there was the incorporation of play, so that work would become like play. This is also in the theater of Oskar Schlemmer, who developed a totally mechanical feeling. being.

The video people are really excited about the fact that in their technological journals they have entertainment on one page, science on the next page and marketing right next to that. When you visit them you can see they have very successfully combined this three-pronged attack. It seems a perfect way to start a company: it's incredibly cost effective, everybody is young, they are all going to live forever. It's really perverse.

Judith Barry works in a variety of media: photography, installations, and video. Recent works include the architectural peep-show model "Public Fantasy" and the video installation piece "In the Shadow of the City." This interview was conducted in April 1982 at the Ohio University Film Conference.