

Introduction

The mainstream cinema (and its sibling television) is so fundamental a part of our public and private experiences, that even when filmmakers produce and exhibit alternative cinematic forms, the dominant cinema is implied by the alternatives. If one considers what has come to be called avant-garde film from the point of view of the audience, one confronts an obvious fact.¹ No one – or certainly, almost no one – sees avant-garde films without first having seen mass-market commercial films. In fact, by the time most people see their first avant-garde film, they have already seen hundreds of films in commercial theaters and on television, and their sense of what a movie is has been almost indelibly imprinted in their conscious and unconscious minds by their training as children (we learn to appreciate the various forms of popular cinema from our parents, older siblings, and friends) and by the continual reconfirmation of this training during adolescence and adulthood. The earliest most people come in contact with an avant-garde film of any type is probably the mid-to-late teen years (for many people the experience comes later, if at all). The result is that whatever particular manipulations of imagery, sound, and time define these first avant-garde film experiences as alternatives to the commercial cinema are recognizable only because of the conventionalized context viewers have already developed.

Generally, the first response generated by an avant-garde film is, “This isn’t a movie,” or the more combative, “You call *this* a movie!?” Even the rare, responsive viewer almost inevitably finds the film – whatever its actual length in minutes – “too long.” By the time we see our first avant-garde films, we think we know what movies are, we recognize what “everyone” agrees they should be; and we see the new cinematic failures-to-conform as presumptuous refusals to use the cinematic space (the theater, the VCR viewing room) “correctly.” If we look carefully at this response, however

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(here I speak from personal experience, and on the basis of more than twenty years of observing students dealing with their first avant-garde films), we recognize that the obvious anger and frustration are a function of the fact that these films confront us with the necessity of redefining an experience we were sure we understood. We may feel we *know* that these avant-garde films are not movies, but what *are* they? We see them in a theater; they're projected by movie projectors, just as conventional movies are... we can see that they *are* movies, even if we "know" they're not. The experience provides us with the opportunity (an opportunity much of our training has taught us to resist) to come to a clearer, more complete understanding of what the cinematic experience actually can be, and what – for all the pleasure and inspiration it may give us – the conventional movie experience is *not*.

These first avant-garde films, in other words, can catalyze what I would like to call our first fully *critical* response to a set of experiences our culture has trained us to enjoy, primarily as a process of unquestioning consumption. I say "fully critical" because the sort of film-critical process I'm describing actually begins the moment we see any form of film that we cannot immediately recognize as a movie, given our previous training. For the generation coming of age in the 1960s, this process often began with foreign commercial features, by Fellini, Bergman, Buñuel, Kurosawa, that did not conform to the expectations we had developed watching Hollywood films. For most people, however, avant-garde films are so entirely unlike "real movies" that they demand a full-scale reevaluation of our cinematic preconceptions; they are closer to being "purely" critical.

Obviously, not everyone who has a first experience with an avant-garde film uses the experience as a means of catalyzing thought about Cinema, but for some people, the experience leads them to an extended critique of conventional movie experiences and an awareness that avant-garde film is an ongoing history which has been providing critical alternatives to the mass-market cinema for more than seventy-five years.

The first substantial flowering of avant-garde cinema occurred during the 1920s in Western Europe, most notably in France and Germany, and in the postrevolutionary Soviet Union. In Germany and France, the cinematic apparatus was seen as a tool with which artists working in the fine arts could expand their repertoire, and, by doing so, attract more of the public than visited art galleries and salons. Indeed, filmgoing was becoming so popular among members of all social classes that artists could hope that the expanding audience might embrace visual critique of convention as well as convention itself. The first film Avant-Garde fueled at least two different critical responses to the mass commercial cinema. Not surprisingly, these

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responses parallel two of the more salient tendencies in the fine arts during the first decades of this century: abstraction and surrealism. Both tendencies resulted in films that were memorable enough to continue to inspire and inform critical filmmaking in Western Europe, North America, Japan, and elsewhere.

One group of filmmakers questioned the commercial cinema's failure to minister directly to spiritual needs in the way music often does and abstract painting was attempting to do. Hans Richter, in *Rhythmus 21* (1921) and *Rhythmus 23* (1923–4); Oskar Fischinger, in his *Wax Experiments* (1921–6), *R-1. Ein Formspiel* (“R-1. A form play,” c. 1927), and *Spirals* (c. 1926); Walter Ruttmann, in *Opus No. 2* (1922), *Opus No. 3* (1923), and *Opus No. 4* (1923); and Viking Eggeling, in *Diagonale Symphonie* (1924), focused viewers' attention on shape, motion, rhythm, chiaroscuro, and color, in the hope they could touch the spirit more directly than conventional filmmakers did. Related were Dudley Murphy's *Ballet mécanique* (made in 1924 with Fernand Léger and Man Ray), Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic cinéma* (1926), Henri Chomette's *Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse* (“Plays of Reflections and Speed,” 1925), and Germaine Dulac's *Disque 957* (1929), all of which foreswore most of the elements of conventional narrative cinema and foregrounded abstract imagery and rhythms.

The second set of film-critical responses came at the hands of the surrealists. Using elements of plot, character, and location moviegoers could be expected to recognize, these filmmakers relentlessly undercut the expectations their inclusion of these elements inevitably created, in the hope of depicting and affecting layers of the conscious and unconscious mind too problematic for the commercial cinema. René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924), Man Ray's *L'Etoile de mer* (“Starfish,” 1928), and Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien andalou* (“An Andalusian Dog,” 1929) continually confront one of the central assumptions of conventional cinema: the idea that the individual personality and social and political relations among individuals are basically rational and understandable. These filmmakers were at pains to shatter the complacency created by this assumption. Indeed, since the contemporary mass-market cinema continues to confirm such complacency, most audiences find these particular films – and especially *Un Chien andalou* – as unusual now as when they were made.

In the Soviet Union, the revolution produced a cinema that mounted a direct attack on the mass-entertainment film industry, particularly its function as propagandist for capitalism and the political systems that support it – from a position outside capitalist culture. The major films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, and Vertov combined overt political content and

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experimental form into impassioned critiques of social conditions and polemics for a more humane political system. Like the films of the first Avant-Garde, the Soviet films may never have been seen by the mass viewing public in the West, but they inspired generations of filmmakers, exhibitors, and viewers, and remain formative influences in various sectors of contemporary cultural life. In Depression America in particular, the result was a Soviet-inspired school of experimental narrative and documentary, perhaps the first American alternative cinema movement.²

After World War II, technological and esthetic developments catalyzed a major flowering of avant-garde cinema in the United States. The increasing availability of less-expensive 16mm motion picture cameras and projectors made the production and exhibition of alternative forms of film economically feasible, and it facilitated the development of a broader range of production systems: the less-expensive equipment was accessible to individuals and small groups who might not have found their way into filmmaking otherwise. The smaller gauge also revived the film society movement, which had enlivened the film scene throughout Western Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, offering audiences a broader range of critical alternatives to the economically dominant Hollywood industry. Film societies had been only marginally successful in the United States, largely because of the economic and social power of Hollywood.³ The availability of 16mm equipment made possible Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 in New York and the nationwide network of film societies it instigated.⁴

The increasingly prolific American alternative film scene took strength from the new prestige of the visual arts, especially in New York. The emergence of the New York School of painting and of generally related developments in experimental music (the increasing prestige and influence of jazz and of John Cage, for example), literature (the New Novel in France, Beat poetry in the United States), and the other arts not only suggested approaches useful to filmmakers looking to provide audiences with alternatives to Hollywood (the gestural emphasis of much abstract expressionist painting, for example, helped to inspire gestural camerawork that tended to give "headaches" to filmgoers weaned on Hollywood movies), it polemicalized the excitement of individual self-expression. The motion picture camera offered a way of extending the New York School's commitment to the importance of individual vision (a commitment evident, for instance, in their large-scale canvases), both literally, since the movie screen is a "canvas" of considerable size, and in terms of audience: filmmakers could hope that because of the massive popularity and prestige of the commercial cinema, film-critical alternatives to Hollywood might be of widespread interest.

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By the 1960s, the cultural critique implicit in all these developments had developed substantial social and political power. Those who had developed a commitment to the ideal of self-expression and to new, critical visions increasingly found themselves confronted by events that confirmed and extended the social and political relevance of this commitment. The struggle for civil rights, the growing resistance to the Vietnam War, and the general reaction to post-World War II repression and conformity were felt and expressed through all the arts. Under severe economic pressure from the growing success of television, even commercial directors were attacking the traditional rhetoric of the Hollywood industry, in an attempt to retrieve the audience. And alternative filmmakers working entirely outside the industry were exploring a variety of new approaches.

The North American avant-garde cinema of the late 1940s, the 1950s, and the 1960s is prolific and diverse, but many films of the period share (almost inevitably overlapping) critical tendencies, general ways of confronting the audience's conventional expectations and demonstrating the limitations of mainstream cinema. These tendencies provide a historical context for the films discussed in this volume. One such tendency is evident in films that focus on the filmmakers' self-revelations. In some cases, these self-revelations are presented symbolically, by the "visionary" filmmakers whose work P. Adams Sitney explores in *Visionary Cinema*: Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, James Broughton, Sidney Peterson, Stan Brakhage, Gregory Markopoulos, and so on.⁵ In other instances, filmmakers present personal revelations quite directly. When viewers see Carolee Schneemann's *Autobiographical Trilogy* (*Fuses*, 1967; *Plumb Line*, 1971; *Kitch's Last Meal*, 1973–8); Jonas Mekas's *Walden* (1969), *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), and *Lost Lost Lost* (1975); Andrew Noren's *Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse: Huge Pupils* (1968, remade 1977); and Robert Huot's *Rolls: 1971* (1972) and *Third One-Year Movie – 1972* (1973), they are in immediate touch with important dimensions of the filmmakers' experiences. These filmmakers demonstrate that there are other interesting, fulfilling ways to live besides the narrow range of middle-class lives (and their predictable "secrets") marketed by so many industry films. And the unusual forms they develop for depicting their experiences reveal the conventionality of industry narrative. The candid revelations of the personal filmmakers provide viewers with a healthier set of personal and filmic options.

A second tendency is exemplified in what has become known as "trash." The films designated by the term develop recognizable narratives, with characters, sets, costumes – all the fundamental elements of Hollywood movie-

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making; but either because the filmmakers lack the economic means for achieving industry-level production values, or because of their decision to use their limited resources to affront conventional expectations by painstakingly constructing a trashy look, viewers of trash films are continually aware of the gaps between this rendition of a story and the way the story would be handled by an industry director. The viewing experience becomes a process of recognizing, with more than normal precision, the economic and social requirements for conventional entertainment and the implications of these requirements. Important contributors to this strand of development include George and Mike Kuchar who produced a remarkable series of collaborative films in 8mm from 1957 to 1964, and then developed individual careers in 16mm (and more recently in video), Ken Jacobs (in his early films: *Little Stabs at Happiness*, 1959–63; and *Blonde Cobra*, 1959–63); Jack Smith (in *Flaming Creatures*, 1963); Andy Warhol (in some of his more plot-oriented melodramas); Paul Morrissey (in *Trash*, 1970); and John Waters (from *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, 1964, through *Desperate Living*, 1977). The trash films often provided their commentary on conventional movies in exhibition situations that functioned as comments on “normal” moviegoing: They helped to create the Midnight Movie Circuit.⁶ Making trash films, exhibiting them, and going to see them was a way of responding to the sanitized, bourgeois worlds created in so many industry melodramas.

For still other filmmakers, the network of avant-garde screening rooms and production facilities was a public arena within which one could engage viewers in an exploration of the nature of visual perception, and thereby reinvigorate perceptual capacities that tended to atrophy in commercial theaters. The preeminent filmmaker here is, of course, Stan Brakhage (he is also seminal in the development of the self-revelatory tendency just described). Brakhage has made hundreds of films, but those that have had the broadest impact over the years (*Window Water Baby Moving*, 1959; *Sirius Remembered*, 1959; *Scenes from under Childhood*, No. 1–4, 1967–70; *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, 1971) have focused on the issue of vision and, in particular, on the gap between the world as it is generally constructed for us by the camera and the world as it is apprehended by untutored human vision. For Brakhage, the movie camera and the imagery it normally produces are cultural artifacts developed as a product of Western rationalism; they reconfirm modern society's commitment to a range of visual perception limited by a “practical” view of experience in which the goal of amassing material wealth requires conformity in how we see and how we act. Brakhage's films are often direct assaults on conventionalized

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vision and on the camera, which Brakhage redirects in the service of unconditioned sight.⁷ Bruce Baillie's films – *Castro Street* (1966), *Tung* (1966), *Quick Billy* (1967–70), *Roslyn Romance* (1978) – are closely related to Brakhage's.

Other filmmakers have explored other dimensions of vision generally ignored by conventional movies. Peter Kubelka (*Arnulf Rainer*, 1960), Tony Conrad (*The Flicker*, 1966), Paul Sharits (*Razor Blades*, 1966; *Ray Gun Virus*, 1968), Taka Imura (*Shutter*, 1971), and Standish Lawder (*Raindance*, 1972) exploit black and white and color flicker as a means of addressing viewers' retinas and the physiological and psychological mechanisms which transform visual stimulation into consciousness. In the mid-1960s, Andy Warhol used unedited, roll-long shots to achieve a variety of particular effects (in *Sleep*, *Kiss*, *Haircut*, and *Blow Job*, 1963; *Empire*, 1964), all of which demanded that viewers confront conventional film-viewing assumptions about the duration necessary for seeing particular visual events. And Andrew Noren in *The Wind Variations* (1968); Larry Gottheim in *Blues* (1969), *Corn* (1970), and *Fog Line* (1970); and Brakhage in *The Text of Light* (1974) discovered remarkable visual worlds in the details of their domestic surroundings.

Although all three of these tendencies have continued to have a significant impact on alternative cinema (and some impact on commercial film), by the end of the 1960s, new developments were resulting in new forms of critical cinema, in which only elements of these particular tendencies remained evident. The arrival of the Baby Boomers at the doors of American educational institutions effected an immense growth in the education industry. For the first time, film history and practice became the subject of widespread academic study. The influx of foreign films into the United States, and the continued development of avant-garde film were helping to convince a new generation of academics that cinema was *worth* studying: These films often revealed a seriousness and a complexity reminiscent of the canon of literary works studied in university literature departments. Further, the profound impact of new European cultural theory in these same institutions was convincing many that, precisely because of its impact on popular thinking, the popular cinema *needed* to be investigated if students were to come to understand how they, and the films they saw, were formed by the culture in which they lived.

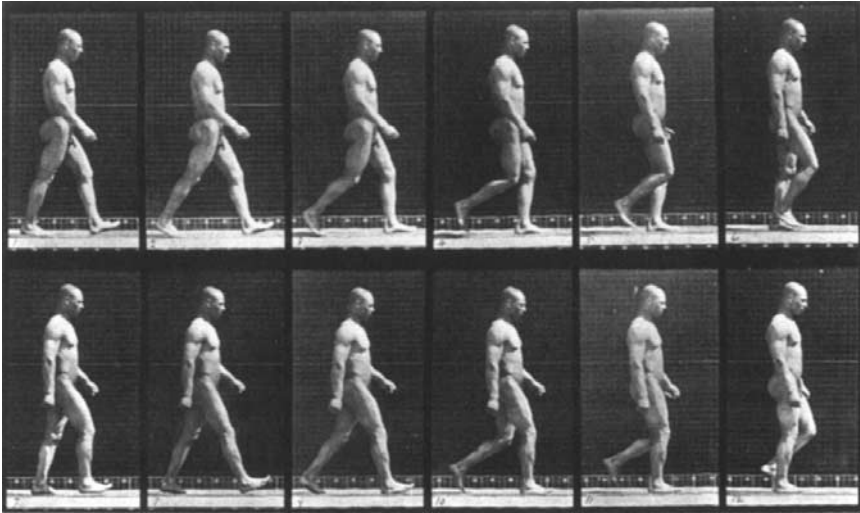
The emergence of film as an academically viable subject for investigation provided a new audience for popular and alternative cinema – the college classroom – and created a new interest in aspects of film history and practice generally ignored in popular theaters and, to a lesser degree, in alternative

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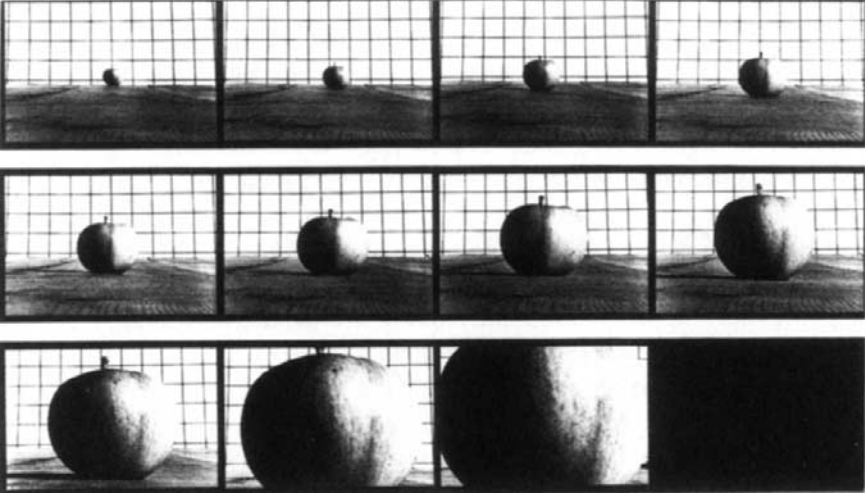
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Eadward Muybridge, *Man Walking at Ordinary Speed*. Courtesy International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.

screening rooms. These new interests affected film viewers and filmmakers, many of whom studied or taught film in academic contexts. Some of these filmmakers were interested in developing more sustained and systematic critiques of conventional film and television narrative entertainment, and especially in responding to the tendency toward overconsumption marketed by television advertising and confirmed by the visual/auditory overload of a good many alternative films of the 1960s. For them, reattention to cinema's beginnings became a particular source of inspiration. Since modern cinema had supposedly become what it was by leaving the discoveries of the early cinema pioneers behind, filmmakers began to return to these "primitives" to see if what conventional film history had defined as primitive was really a set of less marketable, but still useful alternatives. After all, many of those who were seeing their first avant-garde films in the 1960s, and who were not tuning into them, tended to call the avant-garde films "primitive." Perhaps there was a relationship between what the first pioneers had done, and what the avant-garde "pioneers" were doing.

Avant-garde filmmakers did, indeed, find a resource in what had been called primitive cinema. In some cases, their excitement about what they discovered blinded them to the commercial realities of the early days, but this excitement, whether they explored it directly or whether it formed part

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Marion Faller/Hollis Frampton, “782. *Apple Advancing [var. ‘Northern Spy’]*,” from *Sixteen Studies from VEGETABLE LOCOMOTION* (1975).

of a more general environment that had an indirect impact on them, helped to fuel the approaches that are the subject of this volume. For our purposes here, these approaches can be roughly identified with Eadweard Muybridge and the Lumière brothers.

In film historical circles, Muybridge is known for his discovery that motion can be photographically analyzed into component parts and for his construction of the Zoopraxiscope, the combination of the technologies of animation and projection he used to demonstrate that if he resynthesized the various stages of particular motions, he could create the illusion of the original motion the still images represented. Muybridge’s extensive “motion studies” have been seen as an important stage in the move from the animation of drawings, which characterized the popular “philosophic toys” of the nineteenth century (the Phenakistiscope, the Zoetrope), to the printing of photographs of stages of motion on strips of celluloid; and the Zoopraxiscope is usually considered an important early stage of the movie projector.

The aspect of Muybridge’s work that is most interesting for the films I’ll be discussing in this volume, however, has to do with the information he used his technology to discover, and the way in which this information was presented. In order to document his motion studies so that viewers would be able to measure the type and amount of motion accomplished during any fraction of a second by one of the humans or animals he pho-

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tographed, Muybridge mounted a linear grid behind his subjects. And in order to make possible the precise comparison of one phase of a given motion to another phase, he mounted the photographs of particular phases of motion, recorded at evenly spaced intervals of time, in a grid. (Often a given motion was photographed from multiple camera angles; phases of the motion, taken from the various angles, were mounted on grids within a single frame: This way the differences in a particular movement evident from differing angles could be explored.) In other words, Muybridge's motion photographs are sets of grids within grids – and indeed his entire ongoing exploration of the human figure and of animals in motion is a kind of grid, since Muybridge's approach remained the same, subject after subject. Of course, these grids prefigure the essential grid of the filmstrip.⁸

Regardless of how much Muybridge, or anyone else, actually studied the motion recorded in the motion photographs – his central compulsion seems to have been the recording of information rather than the detailed examination of it – his use of a consistently serial organization of both space and time found its way into the works of avant-garde filmmakers interested in studying film's historical origins and the fundamentals of its technology. The way was smoothed by the fact that during the mid-1960s many painters, sculptors, and musicians were exploring serial organizations of imagery as a means of avoiding conventional, traditionally hierarchical arrangements of material, space, and time. A good many filmmakers, including all those whose work is the focus of subsequent chapters, have used serial organizations as a means of revealing how things move. In some cases, this interest in serial organization has resulted in films made in conscious homage to Muybridge: Instances include Morgan Fisher's *Documentary Footage* (1968, discussed briefly in the Fisher chapter of Part 1), Robert Huot's *Turning Torso Drawdown* (1971), Hollis Frampton's *INGENIVM NOBIS IPSA PVELLA FECIT* (1975), and George Griffin's *Viewmaster* (1976). While none of the films discussed in detail in the following chapters is exactly an homage to Muybridge, each film is structured serially and can be understood as a "motion study." The particulars of the serial structuring, and the rigorousness (or compulsiveness) with which the various grids are developed, reflect the sensibilities of the filmmakers. Together, the fifteen films provide a grid against which viewers can study their experiences of conventional (and critical) films.

Whereas Muybridge's deepest concerns seem to have been scientific, the Lumière brothers' primary concern was economic: Their fascination with motion pictures was a function of their work as camera manufacturers. Ironically, avant-garde filmmakers found a way of ignoring this dimension