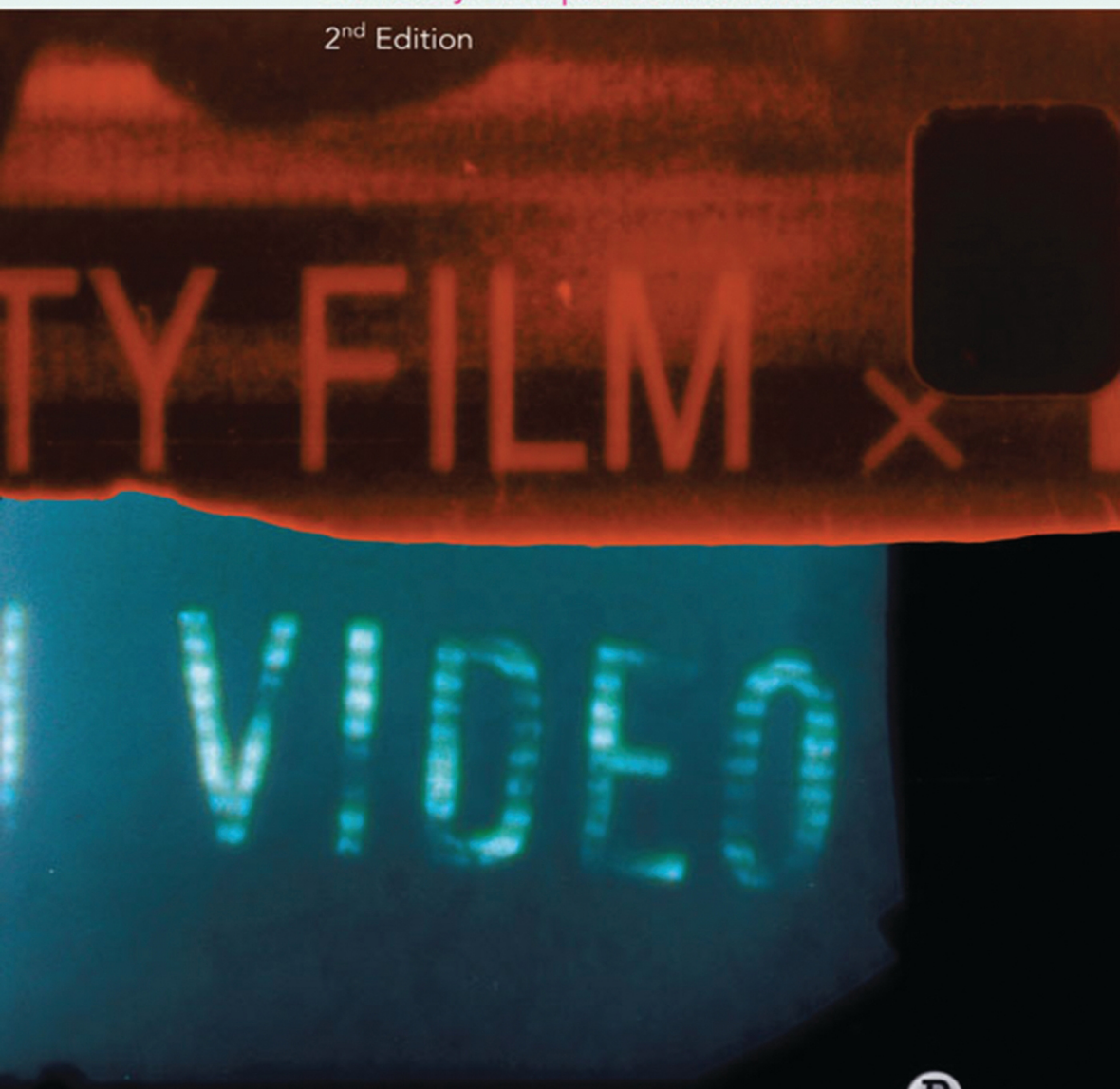


A.L. Rees

A History of Experimental Film and Video

2nd Edition



A HISTORY OF EXPERIMENTAL FILM AND VIDEO

From the Canonical Avant-Garde
to Contemporary British Practice

2ND EDITION

A. L. Rees



A BFI book published by Palgrave

For Angela Allen

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Introduction to the 2nd Edition

This book was originally published in 1999, as an introduction to avant-garde film for the general reader as well as an overview for the enthusiast. Audiences who, in many other respects, have a wide and sophisticated understanding of film culture often know very little about the experimental cinema, and the book was intended to fill this gap. That is why the first half of the book is broadly international in scope and spans most of the twentieth century. The second half of the book has a more specific aim. For historical and cultural reasons, the most famous experimental film- and video-makers in this area of practice were, and still are, North Americans such as Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow and Ken Jacobs. Young film-makers in the UK and other European countries often know these famous names long before they realise that there are other kinds of experimental film art closer to home that deserve attention too. In the second part, therefore, I focused on film and video art in the UK and tried to show how it was linked to successive waves of international art practice from the 1970s through to the 1990s.¹

My view in the book was that experimental film and video does not only try to critique or even negate the mainstream cinema, but should also be seen in the context of the other contemporary arts. I felt the case for this still had to be made, since film and video had long been fringe activities in the mainstream arts, when they were accepted at all. Paradoxically, when the book was published in 1999, the art world was embracing the projected image – but not necessarily the experimental cinema – more than ever before, and this continued into the next decade. Gallery video, as it came to be called, was still in its early stages when I wrote (in the first edition) that: ‘The recent spread of video installation into all spheres of art gallery exhibition contrasts with the 1970s when museums in the UK were less welcoming to video art.’² Since then, many major exhibitions of contemporary art have been dominated by digital screens and film loops. But is this an extension of the experimental cinema or is it a distinct kind of screen-based art practice, and a wholly different phenomenon? I try to address this question in the new Conclusion.³

The gallery video phenomenon has also embraced cinema in the broader sense, by citing, reworking, appropriating and plain stealing from the feature film and the documentary; and this too is connected to the issue of whether or not gallery video is part of, or distinct from, the experimental tradition. Many current video projection artists, for example, know little of the avant-garde tradition and do not identify with it. Conceptually, there are other major differences. Gallery video often focuses on spectator consumption and reception, rather than on the kinds of aesthetic production and practice that were the hallmark of the classic avant-gardes. Curator Nicolas Bourriaud made this explicit in an influential essay of 2001, claiming that gallery video is founded on ‘postproduction’, or ‘culture as screenplay’.⁴ By using terms like ‘postproduction’ and ‘screenplay’ that are derived from the mainstream cinema rather than the avant-garde film, Bourriaud indicated that gallery projection typically cites and reworks the themes

and icons of popular cinema and TV in a new museum context. By contrast, many of the films and videos that feature in this book are typified by material process and the production of meaning, rather than by tropes of visual style and the re-working of cinematic or television codes.

Gallery video is often immersive in the same sense as the large-scale cinema, although with different means, to draw the viewer into its spectacle, at least where viewing conditions permit this to take place. More recently, an increasing number of commentators seem to be disturbed by the walk-through and walk-past attitude to projected images in gallery and museum, and by the problem of where – if anywhere – to sit or stand in front of the screens. Some artists compensate for this by adopting more emphatic projection devices and conditions, a tendency pioneered by Bill Viola, James Turrell and Tacita Dean. This book, however, is concerned largely with film and video art that is experiential in a different way, to challenge the primacy and authority of illusionist imaging in cinematic space.

In the new edition, I have tried to correct errors of dating and detail in the first and successive printings. The footnotes have been expanded to update references and revaluations since 1999. The text itself has been lightly revised, but I have made very few alterations to the descriptions and interpretations of the films and videos discussed, except where a nuance or correction was definitely required to clarify their sense or accuracy. A wholly new final chapter covers the decade since the late 1990s, although I have updated the short profiles of some contemporary artists in the original sections that discussed their work. While the main text largely stands as written, I have tried to take account of suggestions for improvement made by readers, critics and artists, to whom I am grateful, though I won't claim to have satisfied all of them.

I have added information about the many publications and DVD releases that have appeared since 1999, and tried to signal the extraordinary growth of critical and historical research that has vastly increased our knowledge of the early avant-gardes and their contexts. The films of Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, Walther Ruttmann and Oskar Fischinger are now regularly shown in exhibitions, if only in reduced digital format, alongside the art and design of the Dada, Bauhaus, De Stijl and Constructivist eras. At the same time, crucial problems of dating and ascription are unresolved – when exactly, for example, was the early and foundational film we know as Richter's *Rhythm 21* actually made? Not in 1921, despite the title Richter gave it, but his own date for this film is still almost always repeated despite evidence to the contrary.⁵ The literature here, and on other aspects of the early abstract avant-garde cinema, is too detailed to summarise, but I try to alert the interested reader to some of the more recent sources.

Similarly, the last ten years have witnessed an explosion of publications about previously 'unseen' cinemas, in Europe and the US, from the 1950s to the present day. These include close-up studies of radical artists' groups from California to Warsaw, where distinctions between artists and 'amateurs' were often fluid or dissolved. New scholars and programmers have similarly researched the key film societies and clubs (those vital ingredients of all historical avant-gardes) from the 1930s onward.⁶ Another major innovation in the last decade has been the rise of digital and Internet cultures that have made accessible many of the films referred to in this book, including the most obscure ones. This facility barely existed when the book was first published, and in turn it has influenced the making and dissemination of new experimental film and video art as well as access to its earlier achievements.

I have not, however, tried to update the ‘theory’ sections of the first edition (mainly in the Introduction), which summarise some main arguments about avant-gardes and their philosophical contexts. Here, the central figures are (and remain) Henri Bergson, T. W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and André Bazin; and, from the 1970s onwards, such critics as Peter Bürger, the ‘October’ circle and the late Ann Friedberg. The remarks in this part of the book are perhaps schematic and compressed, to offer an introductory outline, but I hope they are enough to open up the main questions for readers new to this aspect of film and its theoretical location. The writings of authors from the first half of the twentieth century are still foundational, and have been adapted to the digital age by many later and current critics, as I indicate in the new Conclusion. The ideas of Bergson, in particular, have been given a new life – or twist – by Gilles Deleuze and his followers. Deleuze himself died in 1995, four years before this book first appeared, although the full impact of his writings on cinema only took on their full force in the decade that followed. Nonetheless, I am not convinced that Deleuze himself offers much to the analysis of avant-garde cinema and video art, to judge by the inaccurate and passing remarks he himself made in his ‘Cinema’ books, and I have therefore not expanded on the few – not especially critical – references to him in the first edition.

Similarly, the great waves of cultural theory produced since 1999 do not, it seems to me, enhance the already well-known arguments about the successes and failures of the avant-gardes, and of modernism generally, that can be extrapolated from the different positions adopted by theorists such as Adorno, Bürger and Poggioli, all of whom productively disagree with each other. Since post-millennial Cultural Studies are more concerned with popular culture and its reception than the kinds of work discussed in this book, I have not felt bound to say more about them here, except – in the later sections and Conclusion – insofar as they affect the understanding of media culture from a position antithetical to it.⁷

More positively, however, I do want to draw attention to discussions about the avant-gardes and artists’ film/video that have been generated by writers and thinkers within these movements or close to them. Essays and texts of this kind focus on the key critical questions of experimental media: the persistence of vision (if it exists), the notion of the frame (as it migrates from its physical origins in film to its more spectral re-incarnation in the digital arts), the problem of screen space (especially in expanded cinema), and the ‘apparatus’ or *dispositif* by which the image materialises as a primal entity in the visual field. To the long tradition of critical writing about film by film-makers since Dreyer, Epstein, Eisenstein, Vertov and many others,⁸ and the now classic writing of Deren, Brakhage, Frampton, Sharits, Conrad, Gidal and Le Grice, can be added both older and newer authors such as Trond Lundemo, François Albera, Eric Faden, Donato Totaro, Federico Windhausen, Jonathan Walley, Noam Elcott and Yvonne Spielmann (to take a sample of international writing on experimental film and video).⁹

It is, of course, impossible to write history – even ‘a’ rather than ‘the’ history – about the changing and volatile contemporary media arts. Even interpreting older work in an art form that has existed for little more than a century is problematic, not to say partial. The saving factor is that older and now canonical films are re-interpreted not only by critics but more importantly by artists themselves, as they germinate new ideas from seeds that lie in the past. New practices emerge as creative variants on perceived traditions, often antithetically to them. The past is always unpredictable,¹⁰ and is always seen differently by successive generations. History in this sense is revisionary. To try to recognise this partiality, the first edition avoided the pronoun ‘I’, less to claim objectivity

(though I see that it can be so understood) than as a small gesture towards de-personalisation. Here, and in the Conclusion, I have been more relaxed about using the 'I' word, and not disguised the partisan or polemical positions that underpin these sections, and implicitly (as the reader will detect) the book as a whole.

Preface

LUCIE-SMITH: Can you give a definition of 'avant-garde'?

GREENBERG: You don't define it, you recognize it as a historical phenomenon.

(Interview with Clement Greenberg conducted by Edward Lucie-Smith, 1968)

The aim of this book is to give a brief, historical account of experimental film and video. It puts the film avant-garde into two contexts – the cinema and moving image culture on the one hand, and modern art with its post-modern coda or extension on the other. But it also sees the experimental or artists' movement in film and video as an independent, living and vital force which has its own internal development and aesthetics.

To emphasise art rather than cinema in a book about film and video, which this book does, needs to be explained and even defended. Cinema as a whole, together with all those media arts which are not more simply and better understood as 'information technologies', is certainly an art form – the latest and most powerful audio-visual art in Western and world history. Many influential books stress this, from Arnheim's *Film As Art* and its distinguished predecessors,¹¹ to the widely used course text *Film Art* by Bordwell and Thompson. The BFI itself enshrines the word in its charter, 'to encourage the art of the film'. So the claim made for the experimental film and video work discussed here is not an exclusive one, as if only the avant-gardes make art in cinema. The view taken here is simply that one way to understand the avant-garde (as specified here, because there are also film avant-gardes beyond the experimental circuit) is to see it more firmly in the context of modern and post-modern art than is possible with, say, the drama film. In doing so, the point is both to locate the avant-garde and to try to engage with it, especially for readers and viewers who find the experimental film so far off the map of cinema, especially the cinema of narrative drama, so aberrant to the norms of viewing a film, that there's no engagement at all. For, by and large, this is film-making without story, characters and plot – or in which these elements, considered so essential to cinematic form, are put into new and critical relationships. The book concedes that this negative view might well be right, in certain instances at least, and starts from there – that is to say, at the outer fringes of the map of cinema and even over the borders.

It hopes to be useful to readers who have seen some experimental films and want to know more about them, and also to film- and video-makers who make, or want to make, work of this kind and who are interested in the general background of historic and recent avant-gardes. No more knowledge than this is assumed, and if the book serves either of these two purposes it will have done what it set out to do. The Notes and Bibliography indicate where to find more specialist information, guiding the reader to sources which explore particular topics in more depth.

The first sections of the book briefly survey some basic issues in the light of contemporary arguments about art, film and the mass media. They try to show the current state of play as far as theorisation goes, and where experimental or avant-garde film crosses over into current debates about post-modern art and cinema. The aim here is to set the

scene in the present, given that the main purpose of the book is historical. Since absolute chronology is not preserved these sections amount perhaps to a signal that the avant-garde has a non-linear aspect as well as a strictly time-bound one.¹² Arguments recur and boundaries are unfixed.

Next there is a historical review of the experimental film from its origins to the Second World War. This is the broadest part of the book, tracing the birth of experimental art and film back to its roots in early technologies and then to the cubist movement and its aftermath in painting and sculpture. It attempts to show how modern art intersects with the notion of film as an art form, with examples from Dada, surrealism and constructivism. Then it takes up the movement in its rapid post-war development and on to the present day.

The second part focuses on the British scene as it has evolved since 1966. This may be considered parochial, but it seemed a useful idea to fill in some of the lesser-known details of the British scene and 'The Co-op After Le Grice' – to quote a front-cover headline from the *Monthly Film Bulletin* in 1984.¹³ The world-wide expansion of artists' work in film, video and digital media since the 1970s has anyhow made it impossible to take the full international overview exemplified in David Curtis's inspired and now classic *Experimental Cinema* (1971).

It is a pity to lose the international perspective,¹⁴ but luckily there is an increasing number of national or 'area' studies of film, video, electronic and digital art to supplement the partial account given here, as well as many current art and design journals and exhibition catalogues which cover these activities. A more positive result of narrowing the field is the chance to review some British work of the last forty years which has not yet had the attention – and above all the viewing – which it merits.

The book assumes that artists' film and video is a distinct form of cultural practice, with its own autonomy in relation to the mainstream cinema. This diverse body of work, almost coextensive with the beginning of cinema and the birth of modernism, makes up a tradition of a complex and often contradictory kind. A further notion is that avant-garde film and video is a serious art form even when, as with Dada and neo-Dada, it looks as if it is doing something stupid. It is sometimes important to make stupid art (it might not end up that way). John Cage summed up this aspect of the avant-garde – in the context of a documentary film made about him by Peter Greenaway – when he said that 'some people take my work too seriously and some don't take it seriously enough.'¹⁵

The focus of the book is on films and videos by artists, that is to say by those filmmakers for whom film is primarily an art form allied to painting, sculpture, printmaking and other arts both traditional and modern. Other comparisons might be to music or poetry, but for a number of reasons the visual analogy dominates. No attempt is made to define the terms 'avant-garde' or 'experimental' in any rigorous way – they are used according to historical context where possible – but the origins of these troublesome but persistent words are glanced at and their changing uses are borne in mind.¹⁶ In general, they are used as names rather than as descriptions.

Cinema as a whole is of course an art form, of an especially complex kind, but this book concentrates on films which stand apart from the commercial and even the 'art-house' sectors. It is most concerned with films and videos made outside the mainstream, or at its margins, by single-person authors, whose scales of production and funding are almost as far removed from the radical art cinema of Godard, Wenders, Marker and Straub-Huillet as from the industrial cinema itself. The art cinema can be seen as an avant-garde in its own right, and indeed the mainstream itself has avant-garde directors

like Ken Russell and David Lynch. The scope of this book, however, does not for the most part stretch that far. It centres on experimental film and video as an alternative to the major genres, and often in opposition to them.

For the first half of cinema's first century the borders between art, experiment and industry were particularly free. Global commercialisation and media power have changed the picture since then, as have wider cultural changes in the arts. So, without denying that 'avant-garde' has more than one meaning and context, this book concentrates on a loose network of individual authors working outside the industrial sector and the art cinema as a whole. Much of the work discussed here is only tenuously related to the cinema as an industrial culture or a cultural industry.

The book relies on many sources to compile this overview, and tries to account for them in the bibliographical notes which follow the main text – but the selections, prejudices and exclusions throughout the book are my own. Scope and space as well as bias have also limited the films and their makers dealt with here. There are many regrettable omissions on all these scores. Readers will undoubtedly discover this for themselves and remedy the gap. It would of course be possible to write quite a different book on this topic, using the same or many other artists and films and looking at other issues. But this is not that book.

Introduction

Siting the avant-garde

There have been innovative film-makers since film and cinema began, emerging from mainstream and arthouse feature production to push cinema a step further into untried territory.¹⁷ They include individuals like Fritz Lang, Luis Buñuel, King Vidor, Jean-Luc Godard, David Lynch. Such forward-looking directors are sometimes historically linked to film avant-gardes which are far more marginal to the mainstream and unknown to large parts of it; Buñuel to the surrealists, Lang to the abstract film, the Movie Brats to the underground, Godard to the situationists. It is these avant-gardes, a set of diverse individuals and groups at the margins of the mainstream but occasionally intersecting it at acute or oblique angles, which are the focus of this short account.

Aside from its important if often unacknowledged influence on mainstream film and television, the avant-garde cinema itself has only surfaced to wider view at particular moments in its history. Its best-known epochs are probably the abstract and surrealist film in the 1920s, the path-breaking underground film in the 1960s and (in the UK) the school of Derek Jarman in the 1980s or the 'young British artists' of the 1990s. In these cases the avant-garde broke out of its often self-imposed obscurity to take part in a broader cultural picture. Some films and their makers have become cult or even popular classics, as with Oskar Fischinger, Jean Cocteau and Kenneth Anger. But the movement as a whole has more often looked to alternative audiences on the margins of the mainstream cinema.

The avant-garde rejects and critiques both the mainstream entertainment cinema and the audience responses which flow from it. It has sought 'ways of seeing' outside the conventions of cinema's dominant tradition in the drama film and its industrial mode of production.¹⁸ Sometimes it does so in the name of 'film as such' or even 'film as film'. It was this aspect of the avant-garde that led the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein to attack Dziga Vertov for his 'formalist tricks' in the 1920s.¹⁹

At other times film avant-gardes emerge out of wider social movements to speak for silenced or dissident voices. Dating back to political documentary in the 1920s and 1930s, this wave passes through the civil rights and Beat Era in the 1950s and on to today's cultural minorities. Their search is less for formal purity than for a new language uncompromised by the regimes they resist. At some historical moments the artists and the social radicals meet up in crucial conjunctions (as with documentary and abstract film in the 1920s, the New American Cinema and the underground film in the 1960s, political and structural films in the 1970s and the fusion of music videos with independent cinema in the 1980s).²⁰ Whether they look to aesthetics or politics for their context, the films of the avant-garde challenge the major codes of dramatic realism which determine meaning and response in the commercial fiction film.

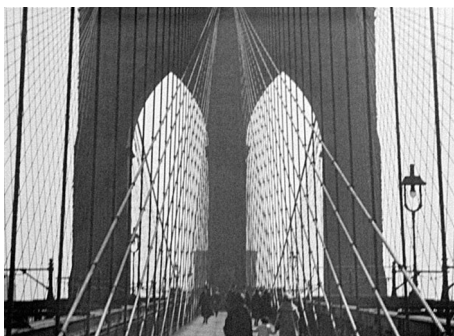
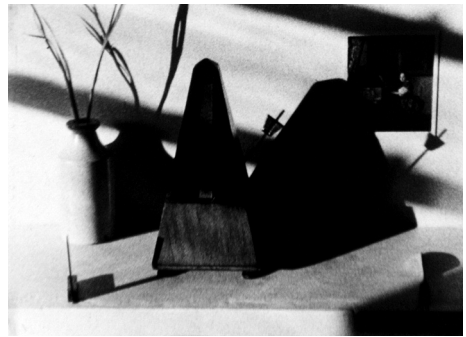
But cinema is not the only context for the avant-garde film. Some film-makers, and arguably entire movements, have overturned the codes and iconography of the cinema

from far outside the mainstream and in opposition to it. Surrealist and abstract film in the 1920s, like much film and video installation art today, flowed from the artistic currents of the time. As the dominant and industrial cinema achieved higher production values and greater spectacle, the avant-garde affirmed its 'otherness' in cheap, personal and 'amateur' films which circulated outside the cinema chains. In this sense some avant-gardes can be seen to appropriate the film machine on behalf of contemporary art. The gallery or club rather than the movie-house is their site, outside the space and conventions of cinema.

Avant-garde film has also taken over the traditional genres of art – rather than those of the cinema itself. These have been central to its language and rhetoric and have shaped its subject-matter. They include *still life*, such as Hollis Frampton's *Lemon* (1969), Malcolm Le Grice's *Academic Still Life (Cézanne)* (1977) and Guy Sherwin's *Clock and Candle* (1976); *landscape*, from Fischinger's *Munich–Berlin Walk* (1927) to Michael Snow's *La Région centrale* (1971) and the films of Chris Welsby; *cityscapes*, opening with the Sheeler-Strand *Manhatta* of 1921 and through to Stan Brakhage, Shirley Clarke, Ernie Gehr and Patrick Keiller; and *portrait*, from Andy Warhol through to Stephen Dwoskin and more recent artists such as Jayne Parker, Alia Syed and Gillian Wearing. At the same time, the avant-garde has participated in the expansion and occasional implosion of modern art forms, from auto-destructive art to multi-screen projection. The idea of experimental or avant-garde film itself derives more directly from the context of modern and post-modern art than from the history of cinema.

But the unfortunate and militaristic overtones to the term 'avant-garde' have saddled artist film- and video-makers with a dual legacy. They are rarely by intent an 'advance-

Art genres: landscape; still life; cityscape; portrait: *Temenos* (Nina Danino, 1998); *Metronome* (Guy Sherwin, 1976); *Manhatta* (Charles Sheeler & Paul Strand, 1921); *The Dead* (Stan Brakhage, 1960; Kenneth Anger portrait)



guard' of the cinema, as the phrase may suggest, however much they may have influenced the stylisation of such well-known films as Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, the montage structure of Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, the rapid cutting of Oliver Stone's *JFK* or the layered texture of Lynch's *Lost Highway*. And if the ideal of 'progressive' vanguard film-making was an aspect of the cinema's optimistic first half-century (and a little beyond into the 1960s), the avant-garde since then has turned with the wider culture to doubt and uncertainty. Warhol is pivotal between these two moments. In his portrait films of 1963–5 a fixed camera illuminates and thus reveals the human face, but renders it as indecipherable and blank.

More positively, the notion of an avant-garde asserts that innovation is a main goal of this area of film and video. At the same time, it implies a continuous history, even though avant-gardes appear, decline and are re-born in different national and historical contexts. It thus begs the question of whether the artists' film avant-garde is one or many. Is it one broad movement spanning the century or simply a cluster of fringe activities at a tangent to popular cinema but with little other identity? Significantly, the avant-garde has traded under many other names: experimental, absolute, pure, non-narrative, underground, expanded, abstract; none of them satisfactory or generally accepted. This lack of agreement points to inherent differences and even conflicts within the avant-garde, just as it also implies a search for unity across broad terrain. Because avant-gardes tend to spark off each other, this search is always open. P. Adams Sitney astutely notes that such names as avant-garde or independent cinema 'admirably' bind a 'negative element' into their definition.²¹

Spanning Futurism to post-modernism, and linked to them and to modern art by the nuance of its similarly time-ordered name, the avant-garde cinema is similarly international in scope. This has distanced it from the main context in which world cinemas operate, their production base in the nation-state. Avant-garde films have easily crossed national borders since the 1920s. For the most part they avoid script and dialogue, or approach film and video from an angle which emphasises vision over text and dialogue. The expanded use of new media in the art world in recent years has been just as international, even if the sheer explosion of film, video and installation art ironically makes it more difficult to scan and summarise the field comprehensively.

Using the terms 'avant-garde', or even 'experimental', film at this late date may appear anachronistic or a provocation. For a long time they have scarcely been used without some degree of embarrassment. The earlier history of the avant-garde idea, which first dates from the 1830s, is briefly sketched below. It was applied loosely to artists' film-making from the 1920s, but peaked in the 1970s when it ousted the term 'underground film' as a seemingly more serious name for the then rising structural film movement.

Since then the term as an artistic category has been deconstructed on two fronts.²² One internal attack dates primarily from 1974, with Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which argues that all contemporary artistic avant-gardes largely rehearse the deeds of their 1920s ancestors but fail to achieve their promise. The second onslaught, from outside the avant-garde and gathering steam since the 1980s, claims that the idea was delusory from the start, a mask or convenient handle for artists and factions in their power struggles for cultural dominance.

The death of the avant-garde, which coincides with the 'death of the author', is in both cases seen as a sign of historic failure. Art which opposed museum culture is now embalmed within it, with Dada as the classic instance. Furthermore, it often follows, the avant-garde in art is now the mainstream itself; there is no establishment against which

to rebel, with the final recuperation of modern art (including its supposed avant-gardes) into the cultural and media landscape. Only the newest and most outrageous art attracts the interest of sponsors, curators and advertising agencies.

None of these claims, which separately are all valid diagnoses of art and of cultural criticism at the end of the last century, can quite equate with each other. The avant-garde once was, but is no longer; or it never really was, but only seemed to be. It has failed, and been tamed by the museums which feed it; at the same time, it has succeeded too well by making outrage the norm in a current art scene which the avant-garde dominates.

Subtle criticism could no doubt turn these confusing circles into defined squares. It might show that the new, neo- or post-avant-garde from the mid-1970s to the present is only virtual Dada at many removes. Artists and museums pander to each other's fantasies. Art pretends to outrage, and museums pretend to be shocked, to promote the show.²³ But then shock – the most obvious surface trace of the avant-garde idea – has long been written off as either historical debris which no longer works, or as fake from the first, dating back to the 1920s. That the machine seems to roll on is therefore a mystery. Why do shock and sensation, or the pretence of them, seem to keep working when they have for so long been discredited? Who cares? To judge from public response, it seems that plenty do. Since the range of (absorbed?) shocks now ranges from the cool bricks of Carl Andre to the chopped and pickled sharks of Damien Hirst, from the absence of subject-matter to its strident opposite, from sparse neo-constructivism to ripe post-surrealism, it might be no more misleading to speak of shock in this context than of the sculptural and the conceptual traditions which also underlie these works and on which they comment.

Although 'avant-garde' is not an altogether happy term, and many film-makers reject it, its survival in film criticism suggests that it may not yet be drained of all content, including the survival of shock as a cultural agent or catalyst. Often dismissed as a merely juvenile impulse to throw paint at the public (but sanctified by Marinetti, Mayakovsky, surrealism and punk), shock was cast by the sophisticated critiques of Walter Benjamin and Antonin Artaud as the founding moment of cinema itself. Recast in the 1970s by structural film to attack film norms of vision and duration, and then in the 1980s by body-centred Baudelairian taboo-busters, the maligned idea of shock as cultural stimulant, interruption or break is far from exhausted.²⁴ Robert Hughes's popular TV history of modern art, *The Shock of the New*, has been updated by events themselves since it appeared in 1980. Shock is an idea in art as much as a sensation, to denote the act of stopping viewers in their tracks, however briefly.

This may suggest a cooler look at the avant-garde idea, freed from modernism's past myths and present caricatures. No art exists free of material context, whether conceived in terms of property and patronage (as in Marxism) or in those of market forces and sponsorship (as in libertarianism). Art, which is always a form of social surplus, is a mixed economy even in the most corporate of regimes. The blurring of orders between avant-garde and mainstream is no new phenomenon; it characterised the twentieth century. The avant-garde seems temporarily to have stormed the citadel but without stemming mainstream modernism's turnover of boardroom painting and institutional sculpture. The avant-garde has, however, won both notoriety and acceptance on its own terms: making 'impossible' demands, resisting censorship, getting up noses, offending, asking questions, refusing any given definition of public taste. Based on an inherently oxymoronic radical tradition, it looks for the junction-box between modernism's secret languages and the revealed world of the public mass media.

Vision machine

Reviewing film's first century, in the mid-1990s, British independent film-maker Peter Greenaway offered an inclusive definition of cinema – or Cinema, capitalised – which attempts to clarify the issues. For Greenaway, Cinema is the sum total of all technologies which work towards articulating the moving image. Cinema is a continuum.²⁵ It embraces equally the big movie and the computer screen, the digital image and the handmade film, and – importantly – such structures as speech and writing, acting, editing, light projection and sound. The concept is large and ambitious. Like Greenaway's own films and installations it is a grand synthesis of cinema as (in Paul Virilio's term) 'the vision machine'. Furthermore, we stand not at the end of its first century but at the opening of its real history – which has just begun.

The idea is stimulating – not to say cheering in an age of post-everything – but focused on the phenomena of visual spectacle which Greenaway celebrates. Much of the historic avant-garde, as will be shown, has been concerned to challenge the supremacy of that spectacle, although it has its own key moments of visual celebration as well, from the 1960s underground to its belated offspring in the rapid-eye techno-art of the 1990s. But visual spectacle rests on illusionism, which the avant-garde generally resists. The idea of the 'moving image' which binds together Greenaway's cinema as total work of art is itself sustained by illusionism. At the heart of this notion is a crucial paradox, for in film the image does not move – film consists of a series of static frames on celluloid. The impression of movement is an illusion. And in video and digital media the image in motion is coded as a scanned electronic signal. Film, video and electronic media are cinematic equations which slide apart even as they draw together.

For Bazin an unassailable realism underpinned his vision of 'total cinema'. Greenaway's totalising vision is by contrast non-realist and post-modern. Nonetheless, like Bazin, who believed that film embalmed time and resisted its passage, Greenaway also turns to the past in the installations and exhibitions which evoke his film myth. For the 'Spellbound' show at the Hayward Gallery in 1996 this took the form of a multimedia spectacle of primal light, sound and film (*In the Dark*).²⁶ Below the screens, in the gallery, were rows of 'props'. They included live models in glass cases and a ranked archive of household and film objects dating from cinema's heyday (and Greenaway's childhood) in the 1940s. Greenaway's optimistic vision of cinema art contains a latent nostalgia, an embalming of cinema's own myth and cult.

For much of its history the avant-garde has questioned this assumption of cinema as cultural myth and industrial product, and offered a number of alternative ways of seeing. At the same time, the act of seeing – and hence of illusion and spectacle – is itself put in question. This red thread runs through such diverse work as the surrealists (notably Man Ray and Buñuel), the films of Brakhage and Warhol (otherwise incompatible bedfellows), the English structuralists Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice (from two distinct angles), and the feminist film-makers Yvonne Rainer and Lis Rhodes (using wholly different methods).

The technologies which comprise the force-field of Cinema (film, video, sound, digital) and which are dedicated to comprehensive spectacle (Greenaway's 'vision'), at the same time are constellations which cannot align or cohere. They polarise around different ways to achieve their grand illusions; notably filmic discontinuity – 'the flicks', where single images appear to move by time-exposure; and electronic continuity – 'the telly', whose apparent images are streams of signals which record the breaking up of light by scanning. This ruptures it from the real which it attempts to denote.

This doubt or mistrust of apparent continuity, or the refusal to disavow what one knows about illusionism in order to believe in its impression, has impelled avant-garde film-makers to the extremes of film craft and technique. Single framing (Jonas Mekas, Marie Menken), painted or scratched film (Len Lye), extended dissolves (Germaine Dulac), long-takes (Andy Warhol), flicker editing (Shirley Clarke, Gregory Markopoulos), cut-ups (Anthony Balch, George Barber), fake synch (Gillian Wearing, the Duvet Brothers), outdated filmstock (Ron Rice), found footage (Bruce Conner, Douglas Gordon), out-of-focus lens (Brakhage, Gidal), intermittent projection (Ken Jacobs and Stan Douglas) – these and more are ciphers of resistance to ‘normal vision’, in a variety of aesthetic contexts but all stemming from a clash between the cinema apparatus and the moment of viewing.

Ironically, many of these devices leak into the wider culture as they are taken up or imitated in filmic special effects or in TV advertising. Here, anti-illusionism turns into its opposite. In its role as ‘vanguard’, the experimental film has similarly pioneered the manipulative techniques which electronic and cinematic technologies now encode in their software to reshape the appearance of the real and thus to undermine traditional notions of veracity. At the same time, the avant-garde has opposed that simulationist shift *from the other side*, by questioning the image, the spectacle and the presumed authority of both.

The conflicts of this position – the avant-garde as both inside and outside the wider media culture – take on new urgency as the full implications of the digital era become clear. Instead of the truth at 24 frames a second, theorists and film-makers alike are increasingly aware of the dark and blank gaps between those frames, through which the real seems to leak back into the unrecapturable light. Digital imaging adds further levels of mutability. When the French philosopher Bergson critiqued the cinema in 1907 for breaking up time into a sequence of regular units, thus falsifying its unbroken flow, he prefigured the substance of a concern which is now widely and publicly shared.²⁷

Time base

If the questioning of vision, and of vision as truth, has been the core of film experiment, to set in doubt the cinema as spectacle which Greenaway affirms, what replaces the authority of the image, an authority on which film’s realism is based? The answer suggested here is that time and duration make up that substitute. Instead of the visual image, experimental film centres itself on the passage of time.²⁸ This has been explicitly recognised by diverse avant-garde artists from Walther Ruttmann and Maya Deren to John Latham and David Hall.

The notion of film as primarily a time-based art is central to the avant-garde, even though the shaping of time is common to all cinema. But the experimental tradition puts film time at the core of its project. Fiction film, in the systems worked out largely from 1906–15, shaped narrative space around a montage framework of edited and elided time. The dramatic unities of the classical and Renaissance drama are preserved in fiction film through the stability of narrative space, plot and acting. Mainstream narrative fiction has itself responded to a ‘crisis in representation’ with an increasing number of films which play with time as central to plot, just as documentary film today acknowledges its own codes and procedures. But the centrality of film-time to the avant-garde has other roots than realism. They include ‘the moment of cubism’ which introduced duration and the fragment to modern art.²⁹ From these are derived the material

tropes and codes of experimental film – rapid camera movement and the long-take, film grain and handpainting – which in their separate ways direct attention to film as a material construct and as a time-based medium.

Point of view

Modernism was founded on a new understanding of point of view, both for artist and spectator. Walter Benjamin's essay on 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', a seminal analysis of 1936 in which cinema is central, traces the fading 'aura' of the individual art object as it is technologically transmitted through the media culture.³⁰ This aura was originally bound up with the location – church, palace, great house – for which much classic art was made. As aristocracy was succeeded by bourgeois democracy, the work of art became a commodity circulating among collectors in the art market. Eventually, art adapted to its new mobility. The 'personal touch' was valued, lower genres encroached on traditionally higher ones (as in the rise of landscape and still life over history painting), the academies were challenged and independent groups emerged, and the portable easel painting brought with it a naturalism and intimacy which triumphed over the 'great machines' of the nineteenth century.

These material changes underlie the slow decline of the stable viewpoint in art, a regime of vision which the Renaissance had inaugurated through the science of perspective. By the late eighteenth century, the certainty of perspective-ruled sight in art was dissolving under the impact of the baroque. Delacroix and Turner freed colour from its natural base to explode space rather than fix it. Impressionism and Cézanne affirmed viewpoint (the artist's eye), but also destabilised it to incorporate the passage of time (as in the 'serial' paintings of Rouen by Monet, or the overlapping planes and angles of Cézanne). Their followers, such as the Fauves, invented a free, neo-symbolist space, which in the later fragmented vision of cubism turned overtly against the all-embracing eye of naturalism itself. By the time of Mondrian and Klee, and contemporary with the first avant-garde films, abstract artists were making paintings with no central viewpoint at all or one so radically decentred as to defy the fixed gaze. Matisse, a more figurative and phenomenological artist, similarly devised a method of 'all-over' painting in which figure and ground are evened out, 'subsumed into the greater force of the surface-as-totality', as Norman Bryson summarises.

Once the traditional distinction between figure and ground was questioned by abstractionist art, so was painting as imitation of the visible. The scene gives way to the sign. The viewer has no central anchor around which to construct the fantasy of the scene and the gaze. Yve-Alain Bois states that

as long as an opposition between figure and ground is maintained, we remain in the domain of the projective image and transcendence – the painting is always read as an image projected from elsewhere onto its surface, and this imaginary projection is always illusionistic.³¹

Immanent meaning is substituted for the dialectical conflict which underpins modernist abstraction in its battle with 'imaginary projection' (here used by Bois to describe the appearance of forms in space, but also recalling the codes of perspective geometry).

When Bois writes that traditional painting is 'read as an image projected from elsewhere onto its surface' and that 'this imaginary projection is always illusionistic', he