

Introduction to "Avant-Garde Film"

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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.

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 (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, Bufluel, 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 post-revolutionary 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, film-going 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 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* (192.1) and *Rhythmus 23* (19234); Oskar Fischinger, in his *Wax Experiments* (19216), *R-i. Em Formspiel* ("R-i. 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 Leger and Man Ray), Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic cinema* (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 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.

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.¹ 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 polemicized 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. 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, re-attention 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 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 photographed, 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!

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 i), Robert Huot's *Turning Torso Drawdown* (ii), Hollis Frampton's *INGENIVM NOBIS IPSA PVELLA FECIT* (i?), 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 of the Lumières, and the Lumière films came to stand for, and to inspire, a nonmaterialistic approach to filmmaking. When Jonas Mekas dedicated *Walden* "to Lumière," the dedication was a reference to the excitement Mekas assumed the Lumière brothers must have felt when they confronted the visual world, as if for the first time, with their *Cinématographe*, and to their apparently innocent openness to the everyday experiences around them. For Mekas, and for others rediscovering the Lumières, the most notable dimension of their films was the seeming simplicity of the subjects on which they

trained their cameras (a train arriving at a station, workers leaving a factory, children playing, a mother and father feeding their baby) and of the means used to record these subjects: Each film was a single, continuous, extended shot, recorded by a stable, mounted camera. For the Lumières, their choice of subjects probably had mostly to do with their desire to demonstrate the breadth of capabilities they saw in the Cinématographe, to show off the new technology itself (by using it to record familiar realities, they could be sure that viewers would focus on the magic of their machine), and no doubt they assumed that their juxtaposition of film after film, each recording a different subject or kind of subject, would be exciting for viewers.

But for filmmakers rebelling against the decadence of the Hollywood industry and its contempt for everyday, personal reality, the Lumières' films were a breath of fresh air. Seen from a context created by the history and current practice of industry moviemaking, the Lumières' subjects seemed to subtly polemicize the beauties and pleasures of everyday life and a populist admiration for working-class people. The consistent use of the single continuous shot seemed a form of filmic mediation that allowed for a different kind of motion study: a sustained examination and appreciation of subjects for their wholeness and/or their visual and conceptual subtlety. If Muybridge can be said to represent the analysis of reality so that it can be studied, the Lumières can be said to represent the synthesis of reality so that it can be comprehended.

For avant-garde filmmakers interested in "reinventing" cinema, the Lumières' single-shot approach seemed ideal, and the result was that, beginning in the mid-1960s, a variety of filmmakers made single-shot films, often extending the basic form so that the single shot lasted for more than ten minutes.⁹ All the films I've discussed in detail in this volume either use long, continuous shots or employ closely related means for creating a similar effect. And in general, the goal of these extended shots is much the same: to focus attention - an almost meditative level of attention - on subject matter normally ignored or marginalized by mass-entertainment film, and, by doing so, to reinvigorate our reverence for the visual world around us and develop our patience for experiencing it fully.