

Artists and Experimental Cinema: A Hundred Years of Infatuation and Exchange

Gregory Sholette February 27, 2008

Cinema has radiated a strong and lasting influence over the work of painters, sculptors, and other visually based artists, who have in turn experimented with the medium, in some cases altering the course of its history and technological development in fundamental ways. In the first half of the 20th Century a variety of artists were inspired by the pioneering cinematic work of Edison, Méliès, and the Lumière brothers. Hans Richter, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger took up the medium producing abstract animations and Dadaist-inspired shorts films. Startling dream-like works were later produced by Jean Cocteau, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí which directly influenced expressionist filmmakers such as Murnau, Lang, and Wiene whose *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) has since inspired several remakes, musical scores, as well as even an opera. In the USSR a range of cinematic experiments took place that overlapped with Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism and Productivism, and not only by well-known figures such as Sergei Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov, but also in the big-budget films of Aleksandr Dovzhenko, and Iakov Protazanov.

Cultural critics Walter Benjamin, Rudolph Arnheim, and Siegfried Kracauer were among the first to take the study of cinema with the same serious intensity as the study of fine art, seeing in its popularity the stirrings of a new, mass subject. Throughout World War Two, small-scale underground films made by Maya Deren, Joseph Cornell, and Harry Smith continued to traverse the boundaries between the plastic arts and moving images, a form of cinematic experimentation that grew exponentially in the post-war era as 16 MM technology became increasingly affordable. Abstract expressionist painting has its dynamic counterpart in Stan Brakhage's films, and American pop culture fueled the gay sensibility of Kenneth Anger's work, however both filmmakers soon fell under the influence of an emerging counter-culture. The rebelliousness of students, soldiers, women and minorities throughout the 1960s and early 1970s not only inspired artists, but also those involved in the cross-over between art and time based media. Guy Debord and the Situationists in Paris produced a number of films and collage-like *Détournements* aimed at de-mystifying what they termed the "Society of the Spectacle." The "Dziga Vertov Collective" (Jean-Pierre Gorin and Jean-Luc Godard) produced biting political analysis of mainstream culture using an analytical style of filmmaking that paid tribute to the "alienation effect" of Bertolt Brecht, while the enigmatic Chris Marker slyly commented on May 68 in his experimental documentary "A Grin Without A Cat." On this side of the Atlantic Paul Sharits and Tony Conrad created "flicker-films" that tested the limits of the eye's perception as if to induce the shock and awe of the carpet-bombing then taking place in Vietnam. Media artists began to emerge in the 1970s. Martha Rosler and Dara Birnbaum began using inexpensive video technology to explore the tradition of documentary filmmaking, often with a strong feminist or anti-capitalist message.

Not all underground cinema and video was explicitly political in the 1960s and 1970s. Minimalism in music and the plastic arts had its counter-part in filmmakers such as the "metric films" of Peter Kubelka in Austria, or Canadian Michael Snow's work such as "Wavelength" that consists of one continuous zoom shot taken inside a room for forty-five minutes. Similarly spare in approach, Andy Warhol's "Empire" also made clear reference not only to the sculptural works of Robert Morris, Donald Judd, and Tony Smith among others, but also to the inherent nature of the film medium itself. Minimal or structuralist film was characterized by repetitive images and a self-referential critique of the filmic apparatus itself. Artists as diverse as Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman also engaged in similar media investigations using Betamax video technology. With the advent of post-modernist pastiche came a renewed interest in everything the minimalists had eliminated. In painting and sculpture this included a return to figuration above all, while in cinema and video it was narrative, plot, and even melodrama that reemerged, albeit usually in ironic, or "campy" treatment. In the 1990s Sadie Benning, the teenage daughter of experimental filmmaker James Benning, made a series of break-through "pixelvision" video diaries using a toy camera. Today, experimental art films (and videos) are still being produced by the likes of Abigail Child and Zoe Beloff, but there is also by now an entire generation of professionalized filmmakers, some of whom studied with the experimental filmmakers of the past. At the same time visual artists associated with the 1980s such as Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, and Julian Schnabel have tried their hand at mainstream, narrative film production, and a younger generation of artists including Italian Pipilotti Rist, Russian artist Yevgeniy Fiks, and Iranian Shrin Neshat are once again crossing-over from installation and the plastic arts into the world of film and moving images, thus extending a dialogue between disciplines that is now close to a century old.

Art and Cinema: *some possible dialogical couplets:*

Pre 20th Century: the *Post-Impressionists, Symbolists*, gothic and grotesque artists and writers / Dioramas, Zoopractiscopes, and the earliest cinema of the late 19th Century

World War I and after: *Dadaists, Futurists, Expressionists, Constructivists, Productivists*, / Experimental films in Germany, Italy, France, and the USSR in the 1910s- 1920s

Pre-World War II: the Surrealists and magic realism / surreal cinema in Europe, Spain, the US and elsewhere

Post-War formalists: Clement Greenberg, New York School, *Tachisme* / Independent experimental cinema in USA

1960s & 70s radicals: Existentialism, Phenomenology, Pop, feminist & student movements / *The Lettrists, Situationists*, German, Argentinean, American, Italian, French radical filmmaking

1960s & 70s formalists: Minimalism, video and television artists / “Structuralist Cinema,” flicker films, experimental video and documentaries

1980s post-modernists: historical pastiche and the return of figurative painting / new narrative cinema and new media, Paper Tiger Television and Deep Dish Cable

1990s and after: mainstreaming of “independent” films, globalization of visual arts / Non-European/US & post-communist experimentation in film, video, digital, and internet

Working Bibliography

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*

Ester Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*.

Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, and Feminism*

Bruce Posner, *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893-1941*

P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*

Jeffrey Skoller *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film*

Maureen Cheryn Turim, *Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films (Studies in Cinema, No 32)*