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| Underground Cinema |
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| Underground is a label applied to the outer fringes of the film spectrum — films whose form or subject matter challenge conventional cinematic habits. The term first gained traction in the realm of experimental film in early 1960s United States. The underground movement implicitly glamourised these films’ marginality, which suggested a clandestine quality that went well with the prosecution to which some titles were subject to, particularly those dealing with nudity or explicit (homo)sexuality, including Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963). The term is still in widespread use — there are Underground Film Festivals in London, Los Angeles, Chicago, Denver, Brisbane, Calgary, New York, and Lausanne, among many other locations. Underground is used to designate unconventional film at large, from the works of classic underground filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger or Stan Brakhage (films made in an artisanal manner outside the industry), to titles by art directors such as Luis Buñuel and R. W. Fassbinder, who operated within industrial frameworks. |
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The underground combined the influence of the post-World War II avant-garde (a surrealist-influenced, highly subjective style of film whose primary modes was what critic P. Adams Sitney called the ‘trance film’) with the factual orientation of the more recent New American Cinema (feature length, low-budged, independent narrative films that operated as a sort of American New Wave). From the New American Cinema the underground borrowed the interest in quotidian observation, which it cultivated in films often lacking a storyline or character-centred action — Ken Jacobs’ 1960s films (*Little Stabs at Happiness* (1958-60), *Window* (1964), *Soft Rain* (1968)) abound in this style of disaggregated actuality. From the trance film, the underground borrowed filmic elements and notions including subjectivism, elliptical expression, and a disregard for conventional film grammar.  The underground prolonged the older avant-garde’s taste for short pieces easier to develop on extremely low budgets. While the New American Cinema movement relied on feature-length narratives with identifiable characters and stories — John Cassavettes’s *Shadows* (1959) is the exemplary title — underground filmmakers mostly produced shorts. Exceptions were Jack Smith’s unfinished *Normal Love* (1963), Stan Brakhage’s *Dog Star Man* (1961-64), Jonas Mekas’s diary films, and most of Andy Warhol’s titles (many of which were feature length), with several (*Sleep* (1963), *Empire* (1964), *The Chelsea Girls* (1966)) exceeding standard duration. Regardless of duration, none of the aforementioned films had conventional narratives.  Jonas Mekas, champion and eminent commentator of 1960s experimental film, postulated in 1962 the demise of the New American Cinema and its replacement by the fresher underground: ‘the living, exploring, changing frontier, the Vietnam of cinema.’ This ‘changing frontier’ thrived on a large group of male filmmakers of diverse ages, provenances, and backgrounds. Few had received any formal film training, and many started their artistic trajectories as poets or painters. Some were experienced veterans active since the 1940s, as was the case with Marie Menken, Kenneth Anger, or Gregory Markopoulos. Others, such as Andy Warhol, Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, Jonas Mekas, Barbara Rubin, or Storm De Hirsch had their film debuts in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Artists such as Stan Brakhage and Christopher MacLaine bridged the gap between the two generations. Brakhage had started making films in the early 1950s in the style of the 1940s avant-garde, and worked briefly as an assistant to surrealist artist Joseph Cornell, with whom he made the city film *The Wonder Ring* (1955). In the late 1950s, he started making non-narrative works with his signature gestural camera, which would prove enormously inspirational to later filmmakers. For his part, Christopher MacLaine made films in San Francisco in the early and mid-1950s, in a style that anticipated the 1960s underground.  The underground encompassed a variety of films: lyrical sketches, rudimentary narratives, diary films depicting the everyday life of filmmakers and their colleagues, idiosyncratic documentaries, and baroque recreations of the affect and iconography of classical Hollywood, with many titles belonging in several (if not all) of these categories. Ken Jacobs’ monumental *Star-Spangled to Death*, for example, filmed during the late 1950s and given definite shape in 2004, is at once a ferocious satire of some Hollywood clichés, a documentary of Jacobs’s and his friends’ deranged antics, a lyrical evocation of biographical details, and a diary of the film’s own production. Similarly, Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963), and many of George and Mike Kuchar’s films can be considered both as parodies of Hollywood, and as documentaries of the lifestyles and aspirations of their makers.  Often discussed as an episode of American avant-garde history, the underground had a broad international reach. This was due, in part, to the contagious example set by American artists who ventured into film with little or no training and minimal budgets, the combination of technological access (16mm film cameras, cheap film stock), a widespread disaffection toward the mainstream, and radical aesthetic aspirations recurring in national settings outside the United States. Shaped by local artistic cultures and experimental film traditions, and animated by autochthonous styles of social revolt, various film undergrounds emerged during the late 1960 and 1970s in disparate places including Mexico City, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Madrid, Colonne, Paris, Tokyo, and Belgrade (to name but a few). Underground filmmakers outside of the United States include Antoni Padrós (Catalán-Spanish), Franz Zwartjes (Dutch), Pierre Clementi (French), Terayama Shûji, (Japanese), the Paris-based Zanzibar group, and the early films of Alejandro Jodorowsky (Chilean), Pedro Almodovar (Spanish), and Dusan Makavejev (Serbian). |
| Further reading:  (Hoberman and Rosenbaum)  (James)  (Megas)  (Sitney)  (Suárez) |