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| Psychedelic Cinema |
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| With the rise of the counterculture as a sociopolitical phenomenon in the mid-1960s, a new visual style manifested itself in an array of public spaces and media forms, including rock and roll light shows, popular poster design, hippie clothing, underground comic books, and experimental cinema. From its inception, psychedelic art and culture was closely associated with hallucinogenic drugs, often intended to function either as a source of contemplation to enhance the hallucinatory experience (while under the influence of LSD or marijuana) or as a mechanism to approximate the psychic transformations associated with such substances. In its various visual permutations across media, the psychedelic aesthetic emphasised organic shapes (as opposed to linear or geometric ones), mandala-inspired circular patterns, non-figurative composition, ornate gestural filigree, and a bright, non-natural, colour palette. |
| With the rise of the counterculture as a sociopolitical phenomenon in the mid-1960s, a new visual style manifested itself in an array of public spaces and media forms, including rock and roll light shows, popular poster design, hippie clothing, underground comic books, and experimental cinema. From its inception, psychedelic art and culture was closely associated with hallucinogenic drugs, often intended to function either as a source of contemplation to enhance the hallucinatory experience (while under the influence of LSD or marijuana) or as a mechanism to approximate the psychic transformations associated with such substances. In its various visual permutations across media, the psychedelic aesthetic emphasised organic shapes (as opposed to linear or geometric ones), mandala-inspired circular patterns, non-figurative composition, ornate gestural filigree, and a bright, non-natural, colour palette.  In cinema, this cultural trend exerted some degree of influence across a range of works that dealt with countercultural topics, including commercial narrative films (*Easy Rider* [1969]), low budget exploitations (*The Trip* [1967]), European art cinema (*Zabriskie Point* [1970]), animation (*Yellow Submarine* [1968]), and non-fiction (*Monterey Pop* [1968]). However, the epicentre of Psychedelic Cinema was the experimental film nexus of 1960s California. In their abstract film works, West Coast psychedelic filmmakers such as Jordan Belson and Scott Bartlett (in San Francisco), or James Whitney and Pat O’Neill (in Los Angeles), achieved an unprecedented array of non-representational visual textures that in their intense, lush, and incandescent registers, achieved a kind of sensorial overstimulation associated with the counterculture’s central aesthetic and political goals of expanding consciousness. These works were intended to test the limits of cognition and sensory tolerance, and by doing so, were geared towards the reconfiguration of the viewer’s expectations about art, life, and the imagined division between them.  In their desire to approximate interior space, the psychedelic filmmakers of the 1960s harkened back to the extreme graphic abstraction of modernist artists and filmmakers like Oskar Fischinger, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Fernand Leger (with Dudley Murphy), and Man Ray, who used the film camera and the resources of montage, re-photography, and single-frame animation to untether cinema from conventional realistic modes. The Californian filmmakers of the 1960s were acutely aware that they were working in the age of television and rock and roll and, as such, their work modernised the virtuosic plasticity of earlier modernist avant-garde cinema through the use of video effects and nascent computer technologies, and married it to the textual iconography of Eastern religion and the colour palette of Pop Art. Films such as James Whitney’s *Lapis* (1966) a swirling, pointillist mandala set to Ravi Shankar, or Pat O’Neill’s *7362* (1967), a study in colour saturation, Rorschach symmetries, and industrial sound, perfectly utilise extremely complex, labour intensive technologies to achieve a multi-layered effect of synesthetic trance and sensory overload.  In addition to the West Coast, there were other artistic enclaves in which this psychedelic cinema flourished, including New York. There, filmmaker Jud Yalkut collaborated with video artist Nam June Paik and the utopian USCO media collective (actually located outside the city), and Barbara Rubin (who produced *Christmas on Earth* [1963], a notorious orgiastic experiment in multi-layered images). Though the psychedelic tendency of experimental cinema was less pronounced in Europe, there were a handful of film artists — most notably, Frenchman Pierre Clementi — who took cues from the American counterculture and produced explosive works of bristling lysergic energy.  By the early-to-mid 1970s, the utopian exuberance of Psychedelic Cinema diminished (as did the counterculture that had nourished it), to be superseded, at least within the avant-garde, by the severe and rigorous work of so-called Structural Film. |
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