

## Housekeeping

- Assignment #1 due on Thursday at midnight

## Lecture

Today we dive into the world of a new type of film: the avant-garde or experimental film, two terms that we can use interchangeably.

What I'd like to do is start with a clip – not from an experimental film, but rather a familiar film that nonetheless opens the door to a discussion of avant-garde practices.

### SLIDE CLIP of Vertigo nightmare

This dream sequence offers a window into avant-garde practices by foregrounding style over narrative, which is to say, it foregrounds form over character, plot, realism, and the logistics of time and space.

This is a moment of pure color, sound, shape, and rhythm - the emphasis here, for the viewer, is on pure sensory experience, not on narrative connectivity.

Now, of course, in this example, there *is* narrative motivation for this nightmare sequence – Jimmy Stewart's character is dreaming, and we are given a privileged view of what he dreams about – we align ourselves with him.

And because of this motivation, Hitchcock does not stray fully from the norms of narrative filmmaking – the abstract imagery is justified because it's a dream. Because in dreams, things can happen that defy gravity, logic, etc.

What we have is a moment of interior subjectivity, a moment where we can infer the narration we are experiencing is subjective and highly restricted, and we can infer this clearly because of the clues and cues provided by the film, namely the shot of him stirring in his sleep – obvious cues that tell us in bold font, THIS IS A DREAM.

In avant-garde cinema, however, there is no need for such motivation or overt cueing – no justification that's it's all a dream.

Avant-garde form and style instead provides us with an opportunity to see the world from an atypical vantage point – it allows for unexpected and unorthodox connections among objects and ideas.

And it is one of the most important locations for experimentation with the cinematic medium – a place where the questions “What is cinema?” and “What could cinema be?” have consistently been posed and answered in powerful, surprising, and invigorating ways. For film-lovers invested in innovation and potential, in the potential for politics and even revolution, the avant-garde is not to be ignored, however challenging it may be.

So what we’re going to do today is just get a taste of what the avant-garde has meant historically, as well as a look at some experimental films from different periods in film’s history.

As with last week, this is not comprehensive. It is impossible to provide a full overview of experimental film in what limited time we have – you could take an entire course on experimental film from just one specific period and place and still not be comprehensive.

But we’ll try our best to just come away with an understanding of some of the potentiality cinema holds for non-narrative experimentation.

### **SLIDE Defining Avant-Garde Cinema [s]**

The body of work known as avant-garde cinema is incredibly wide-ranging and diverse, and it contains films from many historical periods and many national and transnational contexts.

Because of this diversity, the avant-garde is a type of film that is hard to define with clear and concrete borders.

Nonetheless, we are going to attempt to do so by outlining on two broad features.

The first of these has to do with the circumstances surrounding its production, distribution, and reception.

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First of all, avant-garde films are typically characterized by an artisanal (rather than industrial) mode of production.

By this, I mean that they are typically made by a single artist or, at most, a skeletal crew. They are not industrially produced and distributed by large studios but are instead independently made, often in an underground or counter-cultural context.

To a certain extent, the reason for this is necessity, because the amount of funding available to the typical avant-garde filmmaker -- and the amount of money the typical avant-garde film makes -- is quite limited.

But an even more important reason for this artisanal approach has to do with the fact that avant-garde filmmakers typically understand themselves as artists, not as entertainers or even as craftspeople.

As a result, their primary goal is the expression of their individual sensibility and their most pressing priority is the need for complete creative control over their work.

#### **SLIDE**

In fact, many avant-garde filmmakers work or worked in other media as well, and regarded their film work as part of a larger aesthetic agenda.

Many of the earliest avant-garde films were made by artists who are not even most famous not for their cinematic experiments, but for their work in the plastic arts, especially painting and sculpture (for instance Fernand Léger, who made the film *Ballet Mécanique* and Salvador Dali who directed *Un Chien Andalou* with Luis Bunuel, which we will be watching in a little bit).

#### **SLIDE**

Marcel Duchamp, most famous for the concept of the “readymade artwork” and his urinal, which he titled *Fountain*, and whose painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase* we looked at in our second ever class on form, himself made a few experimental films – films which are actually difficult to watch properly because they specifically experimented with the perceptual effects of projecting celluloid film and thus don’t work properly in a digital context.

#### **SLIDE**

Second of all, avant-garde films are typically distributed and exhibited outside of commercial contexts

This means that their distribution and circulation is limited to exhibition at specialized events like experimental film festivals and in specialized spaces like museums, galleries, universities, and alternative film venues.

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Here are a few such venues in Toronto, including:

-Cine-Cycle, an underground cinema, coffee bar, and bike repair shop all in one that’s located on Spadina

-VTape, which serves as an archive and distributor for over 3500 mediaworks by independent artists

-the Power Plant: a contemporary art gallery that often features moving image work

-And of course the TIFF Lightbox: just as TIFF reserves a place for avant-garde works every year with its wavelengths program, the Lightbox occasionally brings such work in for limited runs in its theaters. Their programming of course also features a lot of commercially produced cinema, so be sure to check their schedule frequently for some of the deeper cuts that are difficult to see elsewhere.

## SLIDE

Finally, the third thing to note about avant-garde work is the fact that it is made for a decidedly small and specialized audience.

Experimental cinema doesn't court the mass audience; it's rather happy appealing to a select but loyal following.

## SLIDE

The second way we are going to define avant-garde cinema is in terms of a shared priority.

Although individual avant-garde works may have different *specific* aims, collectively the avant-garde is united by the following shared goal, which it prioritizes above all others:

To reject established cinematic conventions in order to expand the possibilities of the medium, and in particular, to reject the conventions that have allowed for film to become, first and foremost, a means of storytelling. This does not mean that avant-garde films all completely reject the very notion of storytelling – as we will see, some of our examples that we're watching today do not. But what they do reject as a group is the notion that cinema *exists to tell stories as its primary reason for being*.

In other words, if one thing unites the films we are thinking about today, it is a rejection of the cause-and-effect logic that is so central to model established by classical Hollywood – the notion that all of film form should be subordinated to narrative clarity. Avant-garde and experimental films are expressive, and seek to emphasize cinema's ability to communicate in unique ways over its ability to tell a coherent story with a beginning, middle and end.

It's helpful at this point to note that the term "avant-garde" actually derives from a military context, and it means "before the front line." In this way, the avant-garde artists explicitly fashioned themselves as those on the front line of the medium, pushing it

forward, refusing to bow to convention and always seeking to discover new possibilities of meaning-making.

When imported into the world of art production, the term avant-garde is employed to designate the risk-takers, the explorers, the people who push the limits of their respective media...

In the process, those people can reveal a lot about those filmmakers who, on the contrary, stay well within the limits of established conventions. So by learning about avant-garde cinema and the ways it intentionally skirts convention, we also learn a lot about convention.

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Before we move onto to how exactly the avant-garde pushes film's limits, I want to make sure to underscore the word "reject" in the goal I just articulated.

Because what this word indicates clearly is the fact that avant-garde cinema is always, to some extent, engaged in an act of repudiation, of counterpoint.

As Scott MacDonald argues in the essay on Quercus that you are reading this week, this means that the work of the avant-garde is, at least implicitly or on some level, an act of criticism or critique.

## **SLIDE**

MacDonald claims that experimental cinema is *de facto* a critical cinema...

...since it is defined in large part by the desire to "place our awareness and acceptance of the commercial forms and their highly conventionalized modes of representation into crisis."

How exactly then does avant-garde film reject established conventions in order to expand the possibilities of film?

In answering this question, we could point to any number of specific projects that avant-garde films have been engaged in, especially since these films range so widely in character...

...but nonetheless it is possible to isolate four projects that are especially prevalent

Not every avant-garde film will do every one of the things I am about to list, but all of these films will do at least one of them.

## SLIDE

- 1) by abandoning or radically questioning narrative

Many avant-garde works are not remotely narrative in their approach and thus refuse the idea that film is only for the telling of stories.

Indeed, Bordwell and Thompson note in this week's reading that avant-garde films are frequently either abstract or associational in their organization (just as documentary films may be rhetorical or categorical in theirs).

When a film is abstract in organization, the presentation and arrangement of material is dictated by specific visual and/or aural qualities.

This means that what is of concern to the filmmaker is not what the sound track and image track mean, but literally what they look and sound like -- how they draw our attention to color, to line, to luminosity, to texture, to composition, to rhythm, to tone -- in short, to form.

## SLIDE

If we could extract it from its narrative context, that dream sequence from *Vertigo*, in which the film gives itself over to experimentation with colors and patterns and music, could be considered an abstract film – but it isn't, because as I said before there is narrative motivation for the dream sequence, and it features the character of Scotty coming to conclusions about the film's central mystery, albeit in an abstract fashion.

To demonstrate abstract form, I'm going to show you a sequence from Fernand Leger's film *Ballet Mécanique*, which gets discussed at length in your textbook. Here, the agenda is to make viewers see the world in a new way by recontextualizing images and juxtaposing them against one another, to challenge and expand our faculties of perception. So the formal system of the film is subordinated to the abstraction of images away from their usual context, to change our way of seeing them.

## SLIDE: BALLET FROM 8:40

Brakhage articulates the agenda of abstract form clearly when he writes the following in an essay called "Metaphors on Vision":

## SLIDE

"Imagine an eye unrulled by manmade laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How

many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? . . . Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word.'"

Bordwell and Thompson note that abstract doesn't necessarily mean that there will be no recognizable elements in the film, but rather these elements are presented in a way that emphasizes their formal qualities, the colours and shapes, and they are often organized around themes and variations.

Let's take a look at a clip from one of Brackhages own films to visualize this approach.

### **SLIDE: CLIP**

#### **SLIDE**

Other avant-garde films are **associational** in form, meaning that their material is presented and arranged largely on the principle of metaphor through juxtaposition, or montage.

In other words, in the case of these films, images and sounds are rendered and combined so as to create connections that are not exclusively formal in nature. Think back to our week on editing, when we discussed the Kuleshov effect – what was that again?

Associational form is a filmmaking mode built entirely on exploiting this principle to maximum experimental effect.

These films are often concetual in nature and thus depend as much on the *content* of the image track and soundtrack as on how those tracks look and sound. Here is a clip from *Man with a Movie Camera*, the experimental documentary that we briefly looked at last week.

### **SHOW CLIP from Man With a Movie Camera**

#### **SLIDE**

Associations are forged initially through images of stasis, slumber, a lack of animation or operation, an existence unto itself and not in interaction with other figures.

But then we get: waking up/stirring/washing/seeing – a world coming to life.

At the same time that experimental films may totally reject narrative, they may also transform narrative, by adopting some of its trappings only to rearrange or interrogate or subvert them.

These films often do so in order to lay bare and perhaps even rewrite that which we typically take for granted when watching a narrative film.

CLIP

SLIDE

-in this film Rainer narrates something quite commonplace in cinema (and, for that matter, in life) -- a love triangle -- yet she does so in an incredibly unusual way

-in the first portion of the clip, she introduces the stock figure of the “other woman” as a distillation of certain attributes that readily get associated with dangerous or transgressive sexuality: fake eyelashes and relatively glamorous costuming

-then, through the choreographed dance that makes up most of the clip, Rainer lays bare the narrative structure of a typical melodrama

-in the process, she also lays bare melodrama’s reliance on repetition, indecision, a triangulated set of interpersonal relations, and the either-or logic of monogamy

-finally, at the end of the clip, she explicitly draws our attention to the issue of narration by asking “which woman does the director sympathize with?”

-in so doing, she suggests that the way events are narrated influences profoundly how we, the audience, respond to those events

Having fleshed out a bit the differences among avant-garde films that are abstract, associational, and narrative in organization, we are ready to move onto the second way that avant-garde cinema rejects established conventions and expands the possibilities of film

SLIDE

## **2) By systematically exploring the formal potential of the medium**

Typically, avant-grade cinema is interested in exploring as much as possible the specific ways in which film form can transform the world.

filmmakers may, for example, experiment with different kinds of lenses, filters, and optical techniques ...

OR, they may experiment with the kinds of non-narrative relations that editing can forge between disparate images ...



One reason they do this is, again, in order to produce a cinematic experience that allows us to see the world with fresh eyes.

Other filmmakers may explore the formal potential of the medium by engaging in a stringent exploration of a single aspect of film form or a single film technique.

And these exercises are as much meditations on the nature of film as they are attempts to use film to make us see the world differently.

Artist Andy Warhol, whose name at least you have surely heard before, is quite noteworthy on this count.

## **SLIDE**

Warhol was interested in film's capacity to play with time. Warhol is famous for filming subjects in extremely lengthy static takes so as to exploit and in turn reflect on an indisputable feature of the film medium: the fact that film must be experienced durationally.

He made one film, for example, that simply documents a person sleeping in long duration. Perhaps most famously – or perhaps infamously – he made an 8-hour film that appears to be a single shot of the Empire State building. You can see frames from different sections of this 8 hour movie [here](#).

## **SLIDE**

Still other filmmakers might explore the medium's potential by moving away from film's photographic base altogether so as to use celluloid as a kind of canvas on which they scratch, etch, draw, or apply pigment.

Here is a frame from Norman McLaren's *Begone Dull Care*, which he produced by scratching the actual film stock itself – a form of, it could be argued, animation.

The experimentation here is as if film is being used as a sculptural medium, as a physical object.

We will watch this full film, which is only a few minutes long, shortly.

## **SLIDE**

3) A third way avant-garde films challenge cinematic conventions is by questioning and perhaps disrupting social norms.

Obviously, commercial films may do this as well, but they always must do, by definition, within a more restrictive context. Commercial films rely on external funding bodies, large networks of decision making, and perhaps most importantly, the motive of profit and thus are frequently restricted in how radical they can possibly be.

Avant-garde film, in contrast, does not have to fear the laws of the marketplace...

... so its questioning of social norms, be they sexual, religious, political, or whatever, can be far more intensive and subversive to the norms of a given period or place.

This fact goes a long way toward explaining why the avant-garde has often been the home of feminist, minority, and queer artists whose interests and desires have struggled to find a home in the normative world of popular cinema.

It is precisely by working outside of the mainstream that they can tackle transgressive subject matter and shatter taboos upon which dominant culture is predicated, in an effort to conceive of an alternative to the cultural and political status quo.

Indeed, as evinced by the work of some filmmakers we'll watch today, numerous experimental filmmakers were doing this even before a definable gay culture or feminist movement existed to any extent within society at large.

## **SLIDE**

4) Finally, the last way avant-garde films challenge cinematic conventions is by constructing personal mythologies

In some ways, this can be seen to follow out of the previous point.

Avant-garde artists, because they know their work will only be seen by a limited number of people, are free to make that work as intensely personal as they wish.

Not all experimental filmmakers do so, but many have used their films as an opportunity to construct an idiosyncratic universe wherein their own obsessions, fears, desires, and beliefs come to the forefront.

The result are films that range from the intensely autobiographical to the broadly mythological, from the relentlessly confessional to the stridently interrogative.

So that is all for lecture today. Let's take a break, and then when we come back we're going to watch a programme of a few short experimental films from different periods and with very different goals and styles.

## **FILM INTRO:**

### Watching Avant-Garde Films

Obviously, avant-garde works don't afford the same pleasures as conventional films--but that's the point--they're not supposed to.

You have to approach them differently--don't expect the driving force of narrative, because you won't be given it.

Often, you may find yourself thinking nothing is happening, but that's because what's "happening" is occurring at a level different than the one to which you're accustomed.

If nothing else, your training in formal analysis should have prepared you to respond to the films you'll see today in ways which may make more sense given the films' goals.

NOTE – as film students, it is your job to be able to pay attention to audiovisual material regardless of your personal interest in what you're seeing – so find something to look at.

Sometimes, the principles of organization will be ones indicated in Film Art--abstract or associational; sometimes the film's logic will be comparable to that of a dream; sometimes the imagery may disturb or shock you; sometimes the seeming monotony of the film will bore you.

Just remember that experimental works aim to heighten awareness of other aspects of film viewing than being drawn into a compelling narrative – look for these other aspects – draw connections, be enticed by delightful shapes and engaging rhythms, notice how certain of the films draw on imagery from Hollywood and popular culture but transform it, by debasing it, ridiculing it, or calling its assumptions into questions.

A limited, but nonetheless revealing description of experimental work is that it is often as interesting to think about as to watch, so think about it as you watch. Why make a film like this? Is something you should frequently be asking yourself.

Because avant-garde films are organized in an abstract or associational manner and because they so blatantly ignore the conventions with which we are familiar, many people simply reject avant-garde film as pointless, indulgent, meaningless, or simply incomprehensible

But what I am hoping is that in class this week we can begin to gain a means of understanding it or at the very least understanding some of the preoccupations that motivate it.

These films are, among other things, exercises in perception.

As a result there are times when you may not understand what is going on, but the film creates a certain emotional effect and that emotional effect may serve as a port of entry into an understanding of these films.

I am not by any means suggesting that you become a passive viewer and let the film act upon you, but I am suggesting that the way that you engage in these films will necessarily be different from how you engage in a film that is explicitly narrative, and you should at least try to embrace that rather than reject it, since you are after all film students, at least when you're in this class.

### Film Notes

#### *Un Chien Andalou* (1929)

The first film we're watching is Luis Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou*. This is Bunuel's first film – he would go on to be one of the most famous filmmakers in world cinema history, working in Mexico, Spain and France primarily. Bunuel is known for his political commentary and surrealism, and this film is indeed considered to be part of the cross-medium surrealist movement.

#### *Menilmontant* (1927)

The next film that we're watching, the earliest in the program, is *Menilmontant* directed by Russian Émigré Dimitri Kirsanoff and filmed in France in the late 1920s.

This film, which film critic Pauline Kael named as her favourite film of all time, is notable for the way it mixes a variety of avant garde approaches that are outlined in your reading. Pay attention to the way it plays with both abstract and associational formal strategies, as well as the way it plays with, and subverts, typical narrative expectations.

The film is notable for both its surreal logic as well as its influences from other experimental film movements like French impressionism.

#### *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943)

Maya Deren was a Ukrainian-born director who moved to New York as a child. After attending university and taking a Master's degree in literature from Smith College, Deren, who was also a dancer, began touring and ended up in Los Angeles, where she met another immigrant, Alexander Hackenschmied, who had moved to LA from Czechoslovakia and taken the name Hammid. Together, in 1943, they made this film, which some have described as the founding film of the American avant-garde movement. For this reason, Deren is sometimes called the "mother" of the American avant-garde.

The film's main character is played by Deren, and what you're going to see here, put in the terms we've discussed in this class, is a film that challenges traditional narrative. Like *Un Chien Andalou*, this film is often described as dreamlike, but only perhaps so—is it a dream? Or a daydream? Or some alternative reality?

One question I would like you to consider is the degree to which this may or may not feel like it has *more* narrative cohesion than *Un Chien Andalou*, despite still resisting narrative. Why might this be so?

#### *Begone Dull Care* (1949)

Our next film is from Canadian animation legend Norman McLaren. As mentioned in lecture, this film is the result of McLaren scratching the emulsion on film strips, rather than conventional photography. What we get is largely totally abstract – a play of color and shape.

#### *The Bead Game* (1977)

Our next film is Indian-Canadian animator Ishu Patel's *The Bead Game*, from 1977. This film is an example of stop motion animation – so we're also watching it to set up for next week. But the result is again largely the abstract toying with color and shape.

#### *Dyketactics* (1974)

Our final film is legendary lesbian experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer's *Dyketactics*, from 1974. Hammer, who died in 2019, is famous for her films that explore in the abstract women's social issues, including desire, sexual identity, and gender roles.

This is very different from the other things that we've seen and is here as an example of later experimental work by artists concerned with exploration of personal identity. The film is something of a hallucination, a world of naked frolicking hippy women and no men – depicting a world absent from the strictures of patriarchy, the film is an exploration of lesbian identity and broke ground for its frank depiction of the female body and queer aesthetic.

Once again pay attention to the associations between images – how does it make you feel? Why do you think that is? What could the intended point be?

Also think about what this film tells us about the period it was made – its low-budget, shot on cheap film stock and hand held, something that is only possible to make at all due to new technological advances around this time.

## DISCUSSION

From the films we have seen today, let's think about what they are invested in as experimental pieces of media.

Scott McDonald (p. 2-3)

Critical film's responses to commercial cinema:

- Mimetic: partial imitation of forms and conventions of popular cinema
- Autobiographical: filmmaker uses self as subject; reveals aspects of life not evident in commercial cinema; critique conventions of characters' stories in commercial cinema
- Theoretical: foregrounds the mechanical, chemical, perceptual and conceptual structures that underlie film experience

Walk through how these are critical

It's helpful at this point to note that the term "avant-garde" actually derives from a military context, and it means "before the front line." But Scott MacDonald has a slightly different perspective on these films – what does he say about the term "avant-garde"?

**Which films stood out to you the most? Were there any particular ones that you enjoyed? Any that you particularly did not enjoy? Why?**

**Which films question the conventional forms of narrative that we see in Hollywood cinema, or fictional films more generally? Which ones play with narrative constructs? How do they do this?**

**Which films explore the formal potential of the cinematic medium? How so?**

**Which films challenge or question social norms? How so?**

**Which films construct personal mythologies? How so?**