**Video Script**

**Lecture 21 // Arthouse Cinema**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Hello everyone! Today I want to acknowledge that yes, Virginia, there *is* film outside Hollywood. This course is so broad and covers such a large chunk of time that, often, I can barely cover what mainstream American media is doing in a given era, let alone independent, experimental, or even global alternatives. I’m so excited to be able to talk about some of this stuff today because, in the 1950s and 1960s, those alternative forms of filmmaking dovetailed with the tastes of American cinemagoers.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today. And let me add a quick note about the filmmakers we’ll be talking about in this lecture—there are probably *thousands* of filmmakers I could have chosen. I didn’t pick these folks because they’re the best or the most important. Honestly, I just chose some stuff I *like*. These are filmmakers I like to talk about. Arthouse cinema is such a huge umbrella. Besides, the term doesn’t even describe a kind of filmmaking at all, just a kind of film *exhibition*. That means arthouse cinema is as wide-ranging as the tastes of programmers and audiences allow.

So, all that is just to say: if anything today catches your fancy I urge you to keep exploring. Just start watching! There is *so much* out there to explore.

Okay. That’s my preamble

**Legion of Decency**

Let’s start, of all places, with the Legion of Decency. Remember them? They’re that Catholic organization that mobilized against racy 1920s films and helped pressure Hollywood into adopting the Production Code. Recall that the Legion of Decency also had their own rating system that ran from A to C, which stood for Condemned.

So, the Legion of Decency went right on rating films even after the Production Code went into effect. This is a list of the films they condemned from 1955 to 1965. Skim these for a moment. Do you notice anything?

**Legion of Decency (highlight)**

Well, one thing I noticed is that *very few* are American movies. That makes sense—it was hard to get anything made and screened in the United States without the approval of the Production Code Administration. But if all of these films—mostly European in origin—were being condemned by the American Legion of Decency, it goes to show that they’re being screened *somewhere*, right? How else would the Legion even know about them?

**Arthouse definition**

The answer is what we call arthouse theaters. This is a term that can be used to describe a kind of theater, *and* the kind of films that they show. Let’s look at a definition from Barbara Wilinksy, the media historian who wrote your reading for this lecture.

**[ANIMATION]** Art houses or arthouse theaters are generally small theaters which show foreign films, independent U.S. films, classic reissues, and sometimes documentary films. **[ANIMATION]** In the 1940s and 1950s, they popped up in urban areas and university towns, offering a different kind of film and a different kind of filmgoing experience.

**What leads to arthouse?**

Why did this type of theater arise when it did? Well, Wilinsky identifies a few factors.

**[ANIMATION]** The first thing is that there was a difference between American films and films made in other countries. In the 30s, 40s, and 50s, Hollywood films were subject to the Prodution Code. They were somewhat formulaic, and they only become more so when they have to compete with television. We saw this in our last lecture when Hollywood concentrated on making films that demonstrated a contrast from television—spectacular biblical and historical epics, animated extravaganzas, Cinerama, and so forth. The result is that Hollywood films are constrained in terms of content, by the industry’s own regulation, and in terms of style and form, because of competition from TV.

Foreign films did *not* have to comply with the Production Code. That meant they could show all kinds of stuff on screen that American films were simply not allowed to.

**[ANIMATION]** The second influence is the Museum of Modern art, or MoMA, in New York City. They established a film collection in 1935 **[ANIMATION]** for the purpose of assembling a collection of motion picture films suitable for illustrating the important steps historically and artistically in the development of motion pictures from their inception and making the said collection available at reasonable rates to colleges, schools, museums, and other educational institutions. What does this mean? Well, it means that film has been officially deemed an art form on par with painting and sculpture by one of the most influential art institutions in the world.

**Iris Barry**

MoMA’s first film curator was the woman you see seated in this picture, Iris Barry. She was convinced of film’s worthiness and believed the museum should be involved in its preservation and exhibition. But, maybe surprisingly, she found that Hollywood was *not* super interested in cooperating with her.

They were afraid that museum film holdings might be competition. Just like they were concerned about film stars on television, they were worried that if people could go see films for free at museums they’d be even less inclined to go to the theater. The were somehow also afraid of the alternative; if museums made old films popular, they’d be losing out on valuable profits!

Barry had to go to Pickfair, the mansion home of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, to sell the project to Hollywood’s big wigs. A book called *Museum Movies,* all about the history of the MoMA film collection says that Barry argued **[ANIMATION]:**

*“that the films being made in the 1930s—as well as those from 40 years before, at the birth of filmmaking—should be deposited in a museum for long-term care, study, and educational screenings. She cautioned the assembled that if they were not prudent with their products and did not allow Barry to preserve their works, they would be “irrevocably lost as the Commedia dell’Arte or the dancing of Najinsky.” To further drive the message home, a selection of film clips were shown, beginning with The Great Train Robbery (1903) and culminating in a screening of the then newly produced Technicolor short Pluto’s Judgement Day (1935), supplied by Walt Disney, who by his largesse was squarely in the Barry camp.”*

Barry’s efforts were eventually successful, and the idea that film was worthy of inclusion in art collections helped elevate its profile from just a commercial product.

**What leads to art houses (continued)**

**[ANIMATION]** Another factor was the spread of film theory, film studies courses at universities, and popular film criticism. So, you’ve got students very much like yourselves beginning to think about film the way they’ve been taught to think about literature. There’s also folks like Bosley Crowther, the famously cranky film critic at the *New York Times* (whose opinion of Cinerama we heard in the last lecture). He was often hard on Hollywood films of the 1950s and 60s, but he championed the work of European directors like Bergman and Fellini. By raising the profile of their films through a well-circulated newspaper, Crowther helped create a market for it.

**[ANIMATION]** After 1948, there was a need for *more films*, period. After the Paramount Decree led studios to make fewer pictures, some theaters turned to alternative sources like foreign cinema to fill their screens.

**[ANIMATION]** And finally, as Barbara Wilinsky points out, the rising economic tide in the 1950s created an enormous middle class. That means there’s a lot of people making roughly the same amount of money each year—which means it’s hard to outspend your neighbors. Having refined taste in things like art and film was a good way to distinguish yourself. As Wilinsky puts it: *While people associated themselves with the middle class as an economic group, in order to maintain their distinctiveness, hierarchies developed based on taste, culture, and leisure activities.* Cultivating a taste for foreign film, then, became a way to seem cultured.

**Gifs**

In our last lecture, we talked about Hollywood film in the 1950s, and the vibe was generally like this, right? Popcorn, hot dogs, let’s all go the lobby and have ourselves a snack. Then, let’s go back in and watch *The Sound of Music*. Let’s all go to the drive in to see *Ben Hur.* We can let the kids play on the playground if they’re bored, and we’ll get some burgers, and maybe we’ll watch a baby parade (one of which, for the record, I was able to find footage of. It will both answer and raise so many questions. I will include it in the extra clips)*.*

**How are they different?**

Your reading talks about all the ways these new arthouse theaters of the 1950s distinguished themselves from a more mainstream moviegoing experience. This was not fun for the whole family and Juju Bees. They were trying to create a different experience and thus draw a different crowd.

Instead of typical Hollywood titles, arthouse theaters showed **[ANIMATION]** foreign films, **[ANIMATION]** classic films, **[ANIMATION]** art films, and **[ANIMATION]** documentaries.

**[ANIMATION]** They tried to cultivate an “intellectual” image that often drew on **[ANIMATION]** their proximity to universities or cities.

**[ANIMATION]** Instead of kid-friendly snack bars with burgers and popcorn, they created cafes where you might have a drink or an espresso.

**[ANIMATION] [ANIMATION]** They built a dedicated group of repeat patrons by encouraging a club-like atmosphere. They built lounges to encourage hanging out and chatting. The décor and design signaled to patrons that this wasn’t just a theater—it was an intellectual salon.

**[ANIMATION]** Arthouse theaters often explicitly banned children from seeing films there, which helped keep local censors off their backs. They could show more risqué or more challenging foreign films if they could promise there would never be children in the audience.

**[ANIMATION]** And finally, they were designed to look modern. These were *not* the fussy old movie palaces of the 20s and 30s. These were sharp new spaces that would show you sharp new ideas.

**Grauman’s**

Here, you see the interior of Grauman’s Chinese Theater in Los Angeles. Enormous, fancy, elaborately decorated, and a little bit old-fashioned.

**Paris**

In contrast, here’s the interior of the Paris Theater in New York City. Stark, clean, *new*.

**Paris (quote)**

Judith Ostberg, in the trade publication *Foreign Film News*, picked up on the visual cues of the Paris art house theater in 1949, just after it opened. She said:

*Modern simplicity in design is the keynote of the interior decorations at the “Paris”…downstairs there is a lovely lounge, and to add to the home atmosphere, the powder room includes small, individual dressing tables with fully equipped cosmetic shelves. There are bridge tables in the lounge and facilities for chess, checkers and backgammon. The lounge is decorated daily with flowers and the lobby and exterior have seasonal flowers and plants to enhance the visual appeal.*

Now, let’s contrast those amenities to what we saw at the drive-in. They were offering bottle-warmers, laundry machines, and playgrounds. You can see that they were interested in serving harried moms with kids. The Paris stocked cosmetics, flowers, and chess. This was meant for a different crowd—childless adults who wanted to feel classy and smart.

**Angelika**

And while almost all moviegoing is currently on pause, the idea of the arthouse theater as a little club persisted right up until the pandemic shut them down. This is the lobby of my favorite theater in New York City, the Angelika. The lobby includes this coffee bar where you can sit and conspicuously write your screenplay.

**AFS**

This is the lobby of the Austin Film Society theater, right here in town. The design remains pretty slick and modern. **[ANIMATION]** Does this place make you want to buy your kids some Red Vines? Or does it make you want to swirl a martini around and have loud opinions about Soviet cinema?

**What kinds of films?**

Okay. We’re going to move on to the second half of the lecture which tries in vain to answer this question: What kinds of films did they show at mid-century arthouse theaters? What follows is not a complete, or even really an *organized* list. But, if nothing else, it will give you a taste of films that

1. might be shown in an arthouse in the 50s or 60s
2. were made by a director working outside the Hollywood system
3. are interesting! I think all of this stuff is just super interesting to watch.

If you’re curious about any of what you see, I’ve got lots of extra links for you to follow in this module. I would also urge you to check out Kanopy, which has a good starter selection of arthouse films that are available for you to stream for free through the UT library.

**Bunuel**

So, in no particular order, let’s start here, with Luis Bunuel (bun-yoo-el). He was a Spanish avant garde filmmaker who worked in Spain, Mexico, and France throughout his career. His films are sometimes mysterious and experimental, and they’re filled with images that feel symbolic or allegorical.

**Un Chien Andalou**

You might be familiar with one of Bunuel’s earliest and most infamous films called “Un Chien Andalou.” He made this film with the surrealist painter Salvador Dali in 1929, and it famously contains a scene where it looks like this woman’s eye is being sliced open by this razor.

The film cuts to this close-up of a young woman being held by this man. She calmly stares straight ahead as he brings the razor near her eye. Then they cut to a cloud going over the moon. Then, another cut, this time to a close-up of a hand slitting the eye of an animal with a razor and the vitreous humor spills out.

The cut is so quick that you think it’s this woman’s eye but it’s not—it’s thought it was a sheep’s eye.

If you’ve ever heard the old Pixies song “Debaser,” where they’re screaming about “slicing up eyeballs,” this is what they’re talking about.

**Los Olvidados**

Bunuel goes on to make more narrative features, though. His career is a lot more than just eyeball razors. In 1950, for example, he makes a film called *Los Olvidados* in Mexico—the English title is *The Young and the Damned*. And this film is really controversial when it’s first made. It’s seen as an unflattering picture of Mexico—an amoral, nihilistic look at the cycle of poverty, violence, and despair. Bunuel said that the film’s unflinching look at poverty was “an attack on the sadness that ruins children before they have a chance.”

Mexican film critics hated this film when it first comes out, believing that it would publicize an unfair or unflattering picture of their country in the global press. Bunuel, however, enters it into the Cannes Film Festival and he wins Best Director.

**The Exterminating Angel**

Bunuel was exiled as a young man from Spain by Franco’s fascist government. He spent the rest of his career returning to the chew on the themes that had so colored his life and his beliefs—wealth, greed, choice, institutions and the possibility of intervening in their function.

The reason why I wanted to include Bunuel as one of our examples of arthouse cinema today is because of this film, 1962’s *The Exterminating Angel*. This is either the best possible recommendation to watch when you’re stuck at home in a quarantine, or it’s the *worst*.

The film takes up the tone of some of his earlier surrealist work and marries it with his more political themes to present a very mysterious, sometimes absurd, possibly satirical story. A group of wealthy-seeming people are having a formal dinner party in a lavish mansion. After the meal, the servants leave their posts and the guests retire to the music room. As time goes on, the guests realize that they simply cannot leave the room. There is nothing barring them in, no visible boundary, no disaster. They just cannot leave. If you are feeling trapped in your house, I cannot recommend it enough.

**Andy Warhol**

The second filmmaker I want to talk about is Andy Warhol, whose films represent the “art” in art house. Warhol was a visual artist who worked across many media, including film, and he was considered a leader in the pop art movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

**Factory**

He had a studio in New York City called The Factory, pictured here in with its famous tin foil wall paper. The studio was kind of a hip hangout for NYC’s cool kids, but it was also filled with art workers who helped produce his pieces…

**Marilyn, Soup Can**

…like these screen prints, seen here.

**Screen Tests**

Some of Warhol’s early film pieces were short, experimental films. On this slide, you can see some gifs made from his “Screen Test” series. It’s likely that he filmed these himself, but later, he acted more as a producer for full-length art films. These, titles like 1968’s *Flesh* and 1971’s *Women in Revolt* are what you might see in an arthouse in the 1960s or 1970s.

**Candy & Holly**

Warhol cultivated a stable of what he called “superstars,” who were sort of a clique of personalities that he promoted both socially and in films. I want to briefly highlight two of those superstars, the women seen here: Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn. They appear in *Women in Revolt* and other Warhol projects. They’re also trans women. We so rarely get to highlight trans folks in this class I wanted to point out two who were instrumental to the success of one of the most well-known names in 20th century art history.

**Truffaut**

A major force in 1950s and 1960s arthouse cinema came from France, in the form of a group of filmmakers we now call the French New Wave. Francois Truffaut, pictured here looking almost *egregiously* French, was a director highly associated with the French New Wave movement.

**Cahier**

Truffaut was a critic for Cahier (kay-ay) du Cinema, an influential film magazine in France. **[ANIMATION]** The magazine and its critics promoted an idea that came to be known as auteur theory, or **[ANIMATION]** the idea that a film is the unique vision of the director. The director is the author (auteur) of the film just like Stephen King was the author of *The Shining*.

**400 Blows**

Truffaut went on to become a film director himself, and he released *The 400 Blows* in 1959. The film was somewhat autobiographical, and it’s noted for its on-location shooting around Paris and its naturalistic acting. Alice Guy-Blache with her huge BE NATURAL sign would have appreciated Truffaut’s decision, half a century later, to cast a very young boy with little acting experience as the main character, whose on-screen presence seemed uncoached and authentic.

**Stephen Spielberg**

Stephen Spielberg was such a fan of French New Wave and Truffaut’s work, he cast the director in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1977.

**Agnes Varda**

There were vanishingly few women involved with the French New Wave movement, but you’ll be watching a film by one of them this week. Agnes Varda was associated both with the French New Wave and the Left Bank art movement, which was more about capturing experimental documentary images of the social world.

Varda had a really long career—she made films right up until she died in 2019, and her films often featured women. About this, she said “I’m not at all a theoretician of feminism. [But] I did all that—my photos, my craft, my film, my life—on my terms, my own terms, and not to do it like a man.”

**Maya Deren**

Finally, we’ll end this woefully incomplete whirlwind tour of arthouse cinema with a look at Maya Deren, the earliest art filmmaker on this list. Deren was a refugee; her family fled anti-Semitic persecution in the Ukraine and she grew up here, in the US. She went to Smith and NYU and became a part of the Greenwich Village art scene in the late 1930s. She supported herself for a few years doing freelance writing for radio shows and foreign-language newspapers.

Deren is something of an artistic polymath—she’s a poet and a photographer in addition to being a filmmaker, but most importantly, she’s a dancer. Deren kind of thinks with a dancer’s brain. Her films often feature movement quite prominently, and they use the movement of the human body to explore time, perception, and other themes.

**Avant Garde**

So, Deren is known as an avant garde filmmaker. What exactly does that mean? **[ANIMATION]** Well, the avant garde is an intelligentsia, or a group of intellectuals, who develop new or experimental concepts, especially in the arts. The term can also be used to describe the art they develop; members of the avant garde produce avant garde art.

If that’s a tongue twister, just think about avant garde art as pushing the envelope. It’s edgy, radical, and/or unorthodox.

**Meshes of the Afternoon**

**[ANIMATION]** *Meshes of the Afternoon,* made in 1943 with her husband, Alexander Hammid, is Deren’s first film. She performs in it in addition to co-directing. It’s a silent black and white short, but it had a soundtrack added to it in 1959 and many other people have dubbed it. The version we’ll watch has a much more recent score.

**[ANIMATION]** The film has no traditional narrative. The form is nonlinear and experimental. It has repeated images—a knife, a key, a telephone—and perhaps they are symbolic.

**[ANIMATION]** The film resists any easy interpretations. Some people over the years have thought about it in conjunction with Freudian ideas about psychology. There seem to be three versions of Deren trapped in a house, and that generally corresponds with the id, ego, and superego Freud theorized.

**[ANIMATION]** On the other hand, other people have interpreted it as something of a feminist film. It has elements of a domestic horror—it all takes place in the home, and there’s a sense of violence, dread, foreboding, and wanting to escape. This seems to hint at some feminist ideals, but again, this isn’t the kind of film that has one meaning you can unlock.

**Tips for watching**

If you’ve never seen *Meshes of the Afternoon* before, I hope you enjoy it. Here’s the part where I confess that I *love* experimental film and art film. To me, it’s a really rewarding thing to dive into a piece of art that uses a medium we are so familiar with and manages to utterly disorient us.

But if you haven’t watched an experimental film before, it can also be hard. Here are some tips to keep in mind as you watch that might help you enjoy weird films.

**[ANIMATION]** First, it’s okay to feel confused! In fact, that’s normal. These are not traditionally narrative films, but your brain will fight against that. We’re so used to seeing and telling stories, it’s natural to try to find one.

**[ANIMATION]** Experimental films might use symbolic images that hint at meanings or themes, but there’s almost never a code to crack. It’s not like if you watch *Meshes of the Afternoon* and think okay, the knife is a penis, suddenly the rest of the film snaps into view. This can be frustrating, but it can also be liberating! You’re not watching it wrong if you don’t “decode” what the filmmaker is saying.

**[ANIMATION]** If you’re at a loss, try the film version of associational listening, which we learned about in our radio lectures. Try association viewing. What does the film make you think of? What web of memories and associations does it activate?

**[ANIMATION]** Another technique is something that I call haptic viewing. Pay attention to the feelings you feel in your body. Are you tense? Are you tired? Are you relaxed? Are you leaning in? Are you leaning away? What face are you making? By listening to your body, you can get information about the effect the film is having on you.

**[ANIMATION]** You can also check in with your emotions. Even if the images on the screen aren’t telling you a whole story, they might make you feel something anyway. Do you feel dread? Do you feel anger? Are you happy? Are you amused?

**[ANIMATION]** Finally, when in doubt, treat the images in an art film like *art*. Observe shapes, sounds, movements, rhythm, repetition, structure, composition, contrast and so forth. Try to appreciate the images as compositions, not as elements of a story.

At the end of the day, I can’t promise you’ll love *Meshes of the Afternoon* or any experimental or art films, but I can say that they’re different than what we normally get from Hollywood. And that puts us right in the same place as arthouse cinemagoers of the 1950s, who came out over and over to watch challenging, confusing, weird pictures, just to see something *else.*