

Audiences  
experience cinema as  
a form of illusion  
essay



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' The experience of the avant-garde film can be disorienting. Film has only an eighty (now over one hundred) year history and so does not exhibit ruptures with dominant codes as does the history of most disciplines, including painting, and physics, among others. One is therefore less prepared for the unfamiliar in film than other areas.

' The most common and well established of all films is the feature-length, commercial, entertainment film. It assumes that film is mass entertainment requiring certain levels of production and marketing to sustain it as such. These films are produced for the pleasure of the masses. The film makers skills can rightly be compared to those of the magician and illusionist in so much as they create imaginary realities that the audience are absorbed into for the length of the film, even in some instances, for some time after. The improvement of sound, colour and wide-screen have been viewed as essential decoration to a product of an industry that continually seeks to increase its audiences.

Film appreciation in general has supported this type of film making by bestowing it the importance it enjoys today while attempting, in the process, to balance its basis in mass entertainment with its justification as art. Avant-garde has been a part of cinema throughout the history of film making from the 1920s to the present. Although it has had periods of substantial popularity, the avant-garde has never been at the forefront of cinema, the first major moment being the German " graphic" cinema. The French cinema saw the rise of Cubist, Dada, cinema pur and surrealist filmmaking in the 1920's. During this period and later in 1960s it was scrutinised as a display of leading culture.

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While the avant-garde continued through the early sound era, it was not until the early 1940's that American artist Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Joseph Cornell, James Broughton and Sydney Peterson renewed connections with the "surrealist" filmmaking. American experimental cinema then developed a succession of genres from the "trance" to the "mythopoetic" film through the fifties and sixties. P. Adams Sitney refers to the independent film of the late 60s and early 70s as "structural film".

By "structural film" he means; "a cinema of structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film".<sup>2</sup> Here he is referring to the work of Michael Snow, George Landow, Tony Conrad, Ernie Gehr and Joyce Wieland as well as Paul Sharits. Michael Snow's primary concern is with perception. He shaped his most famous films, simplifying their "Narrative" down to basic camera movements and exploring the effect these movements have on the audience perception of space and time.

Among these are *La Region Centrale* (1970-71), in which Snow chose to film a deserted region, without a single trace of human life: a sort of plateau, opening onto a vast circular view of the surrounding mountains. And ;--> [Back and Forth] (1969), which attempts to transcend through motion. But one of the most celebrated and important films in the history of the avant-garde is *Wavelength* (1967). A continuous forty five minute single zoom from a fixed camera position across an eighty foot New York loft, a progression that changes from a wide view to a much more restricted field of vision on the far wall. This is has been hailed as the watermark of 'structuralism' film.

By exploring the zoom in this way Michael Snow has created a unique meaning for the experience of time. According to Snow's fixed rule, i. e. that the camera cannot look back, it becomes an apparatus that travels the length of the loft, propelling the viewer with it. What it has passed through is obviously behind it and because of its irreversible advance, what is behind it is not retrievable.

This slow creep forward redefines filmic action but is still, tense and exciting. Four human events take place in the path of the zoom but what is more important are the things that break this up: colour changes, short sections of the film in negative, the altering of film stock (which contradicts the term "continuous zoom") and superimpositions of the movement. Music, or more appropriately in this case, sound is not always used as a way to tell the audience that this is sad, or this is happy, as it is in narrative films. Here Snow gives the sound a more homogenous and equal position in relation to what is happening on the film. The visual trajectory of the film is matched, in part, by the sound track. An electronic sine wave, which goes from its lowest note to its highest in about the same length of time, "the ear equivalent to a zoom".

3Paul Sharits experimented extensively with multi-projector films, but they were rarely exactly synchronised, as in *Razor blades* (1968), although they were intended to be. Paul Sharits also experimented with the flicker effect. Like Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), [The first flicker film] and Tony Conrad's *Flicker* (1966) the basic structure of *Razor blades* involves optical pulsations caused by extremely short spurts of information, and the effect is dazzling. But whereas Kubelka and Conrad's films were totally in black and

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white, Sharits appetite to explore the flicker came from his interest in colour. He saw that film themes could be developed purely through the use of colours.

The fluctuating colours in his films not only foreground the pulsing light beams, they also reflexively remind the viewer of the physicality of the frame and of the surface on which films are projected. While watching his films we find that when colours change slowly, a flat, undifferentiated field fills the entire image. But as the speed increases, random shapes appear that extend into the auditorium space creating an optical space, shifting between two and three dimensions, which is characteristic of our perception of the space in all films. The alternating bursts of colour are what not only structure this film but what allows Sharits to explore the kinetics of cinema and its capacity to create the illusion of motion.

Avant-garde filmmakers of the sixties and seventies have also taken the exploration of the materials and apparatus of the cinema to other extremes through a physical “hands on” approach. By creating a set of metaphors for the production and projection of film Tony Conrad showed an awareness of what film is – a celluloid material. In 1974 he exhibited an evening of film projects that included a display of filmstrips being pickled. The actual projection of film that had been cooked as part of a recipe.

The preparation of a dish on stage followed by the projection (throwing) of the cooked film onto the screen, and the presentation of an incessant four-projector system of film loops consisting of abstract images accompanied by taped musical compositions. The avant-garde is an eccentric term and idea;

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a mixture of a military metaphor applied to the art and cultural worlds, and a synonym and substitute for the more inoffensive 'Modern' or 'Modern movement.' To some extent it is also a pseudo concept. Used to confirm the reputations of those who have arrived at the pinnacle of their career. So what defines the term "avant-garde" or "experimental film"? As Sitney put it in his survey of the avant-garde film, "the often unacknowledged aspiration of the American avant-garde film has been the cinematic reproduction of the human mind" 4 Avant-garde cinema manifests itself as a radical, and radically independent, alternative to other cinematic modes. It subverts cinematic conventions by exploring the medium, its properties and materials, and in the process creates its own history separate from that of the classical narrative cinema.

5 Avant-garde cinema has instead developed alongside advanced work in modern poetry, theatre, music and painting. It has developed its own genres, formal traditions and theoretical reflections as well as originating institutions of production, distribution and exhibition.