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## American Experimental Film

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Like many of the predominant art movements in the Twentieth Century, American Experimental Film, one could argue, saw its birth in New York City. Conversely, one could easily claim that the movement began on the opposite coast (in San Francisco, for instance, where truly significant developments were made, or in the shadow of Hollywood, where several filmmakers got their start. Regardless, though heavily influenced by the [German Expressionists](#) [3] ([F.W. Murnau](#) [4], [Fritz Lang](#) [5], [Robert Wiene](#) [6]), the Soviet Constructivists ([Alexander Dovzhenko](#) [7], [Sergei Eisenstein](#) [8], [Vsevolod Pudovkin](#) [9]) and the early French Trick-Filmmakers ([Georges Melies](#) [10], Emile Cohl, Ferdinand Zecca), experimental work in the 1950s and 1960s grew out of a desire to expand beyond the rules of conventional narrative and invent a new language for film. Indifferent to the labels of "avant-garde," "underground" or "non-narrative" film, the "experimental" genre (as a

unifying term), has two qualities that distinguish itself from other forms of filmmaking: a desire to deconstruct, or entirely ignore, the Hollywood aesthetic and a complete exploitation of the range of tools available to filmmakers. Fundamentally, experimental films provide a new way of seeing the world that is free from the traditional sense of "storytelling" and, instead, communicate in a purely visual manner. Much like today, the foundation for the medium found its roots in relatively inexpensive materials. In the early 1960s, price reductions in film stock and equipment aided the movement. Presently, the relative ease and availability of digital video and the appropriation of culturally obsolete equipment (such as Super-8 and PixelVision) has regenerated interest in the form.

The spiritual center of the emerging community of closely-knit artists in New York was a Lithuanian immigrant who survived concentration camp imprisonment in war-torn Europe and eventually relocated to New York in 1950. [Jonas Mekas](#) [11], one of the founders of [Anthology Film Archives](#) [12] and the first major film critic for the *Village Voice*, was an incredibly outspoken champion of the New Cinema, as it was then known. With a habit of producing extremely grand statements that sound more like political rally pronouncements, Mekas would speak of film as if it were the perfect medium. In the pages of *Film Culture* (a magazine Mekas founded in 1955, devoted to independent film), he would promote the trailblazers of the underground cinema movement. [Maya Deren](#) [13] ([At Land](#) [14], 1944), [Stan Brakhage](#) [15] ([Mothlight](#) [16], 1963) and others received an unprecedented level of attention due to Mekas's efforts.

As a filmmaker, Mekas developed a form of "diary film" immediately recognizable from its gritty technique. His documents of friends such as [Andy Warhol](#) [17], [Yoko Ono](#) [18], Peter Kubelka, Nam June Paik and John Cage act as a "who's who" of the New York Avant-Garde. He described his startling and somewhat chaotic style as an attempt to record how we see images in our dreams; in essence, he tried to put our subconscious on the screen.

A fantastic venue for esoteric work which opened in the 1970s and is still operational today, Anthology

Film Archives was only one of many venues that featured experimental films in New York. There were numerous screenings all over Manhattan in lofts, churches and concert halls. The film community would mix and mingle interchangeably with the emerging avant-garde in music, art and performance. Many such artists used film as simply another medium, just as if they were painting a canvas or performing a composition. Indeed, many early experimental filmmakers came from an extensive background in the visual arts: [Joseph Cornell](#) [19], Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger and Andy Warhol. Even the short films of [Charles and Ray Eames](#) [20] bear the stamp of experimental practices.

Without distribution, these films would never be seen by anyone. Recognizing this problem, Amos Vogel founded the influential Cinema 16 in 1947. Until it closed in 1963 due to rising expenses, Cinema 16 was the primary source in the country for innovative work. Continuing the noble effort, The Filmmaker's Cooperative was formed in 1962 (in part because of Cinema 16's reluctance to promote controversial works). Other distributors followed soon after, most notably San Francisco-based Canyon Cinema Co-Op in 1967.

Another key figure in the burgeoning NYC film community was Jack Smith. Long before the trash cinema of [Harmony Korine](#) [21] or [Richard Kern](#) [22] (and even predating [John Waters](#) [23]'s earliest efforts), Smith's 1963 film *Flaming Creatures* created a stir for its highly charged, hedonistic orgy portrayed on screen. The composition of bodies intertwined is highly reminiscent of collage work and remains one of the greatest achievements in underground cinema. Until his death in 1989, Smith was an extremely important figure in the flourishing performance art community in the East Village and Lower East Side.

Thematically and symbolically, topical subjects were occasionally addressed in experimental films. Protests of social injustice and the American presence in Vietnam were prominent in several shorts, just as these issues figured significantly in the popular culture of the time. Particularly in Bruce Conner's *Report* (1967) and [Scott Bartlett](#) [24]'s *Moon* (1969), news footage was incorporated to make a direct comment on issues ranging from the assassination of JFK in the former to the impact of the moon landing in the latter. Mysticism, mythology and the occult were conjured in the films of Ron Rice (*Chumlum*, 1964) and Kenneth Anger. In Anger's *Lucifer Rising* (1970-1980), ceremonies for the invocation of the "lord of light" convey (in the director's words) that the "key to joy is disobedience." Sexual liberation and homoeroticism surfaced in the films of Carolee Schneeman (*Fuses*, 1967), Barbara Rubin (*Christmas on Earth*, 1963) and much of James Broughton's work. Clearly, although experimental films are largely free of conventional narrative, they are certainly able to communicate complicated topics in ways that "normal" films still find impossible.

Often, the actual process of making the film becomes the message or meaning of the work. Simply deconstructing or re-editing an existing film made for a revolution in how we view and perceive the notion of cinema. Educational films or newsreels were cut-up and re-evaluated substantively and politically. The "found footage" process, used independently by Bruce Connor and George Landow in the early 1960s, remains a very prominent method for contemporary filmmakers as diverse as the high-art pieces of Martin Arnold and [Peter Tscherkassky](#) [25] to the low-art (if a distinction can be made) conspiracy films of [Craig Baldwin](#) [26] (*Spectres of the Spectrum* [27], 1999).

Landow (later Owen Land) also figured prominently in the growing movement of "film as process" known as "Structural Film" or "Pure Film." The most infamous of these shorts, Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1965), was simply white leader and black leader alternating at irregular intervals to cause a hallucinatory affect of absolute light and darkness (and, in a few unfortunate cases, epileptic seizures). Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), at the other end of the structural spectrum, seemingly consists of a slowly zooming shot from one end of a room to the other. The destination, a close-up of a small photo on the opposite wall, takes 45 minutes to complete. This film, justifiably championed as one of the great pieces of the avant-garde, continues to frustrate audiences with its glacial pace. During an early screening at the Museum of Modern Art, *Wavelength* (if legend is to be believed) nearly caused a riot among the impatient viewers.

Gradually, experimental techniques have spread throughout the film world. Experimental work is still flourishing in academic institutions, particularly where several filmmakers (namely Stan Brakhage, George Kuchar and James



Benning) taught (or, in the case of the latter, continues to teach). The influence of experimental film can easily be identified today in the fast-paced kinetic editing of television commercials and numerous motion pictures. More importantly, experimental filmmakers continue to take advantage of every possible use of camera and projector, image and sound, to innovate in the under-appreciated art form.

The medium even achieved a level of relative respectability when Deren's *Mesher of an Afternoon* (1943) was accepted into the [National Film Registry of Archived Films](#) [28] in 1990 (followed by the inclusion of both Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* (1964) and Bruce Baillie's *Castro Street* (1966) in 1992). The exposure of experimental film has increased as well, from a featured status at the Whitney's acclaimed American Century retrospective (featuring Sadie, daughter of the aforementioned James, Benning's critically acclaimed *Flat is Beautiful*, 1998) to the appearance of feature-length works infused with experimental traits by [Gaspar Noe](#) [29], [Jan Svankmajer](#) [30] and others. In the wake of such interest, several venues have appeared to expose new audiences to challenging material, from the [Robert Beck Memorial Cinema](#) [31] at Collective Unconscious in New York to the [Little Theatre](#) [32] in Seattle and countless venues in-between. The trend is certainly not limited to the west-side of the Atlantic, either. Microcinemas and athenaeums throughout the world are presenting programs of experimental work.



Mekas: Brakhage Walking in Central Park

### Suggestions for further exploration:

Although largely out-of-print, four essential texts provide a great deal of interest for anyone wanting to explore the experimental medium further: Sheldon Renan's *An Introduction to the American Underground Film; The New American Cinema*, edited by Gregory Battcock; Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema*; and Amos Vogel's fantastic *Film as a Subversive Art*.

Fortunately, a fifth book - P. Adam Sitney's seminal *Visionary Film*, now in its third edition - is currently available at most worthwhile booksellers.

Among the many discussion groups on the topic, FRAMEWORKS is particularly recommended. You can subscribe to the list by sending a "subscribe frameworks" message to [Listserv@Listserv.aol.com](mailto:Listserv@Listserv.aol.com) [33].

Please also refer to our modest but growing [Experimental/Avant-Garde](#) [34] section.

*Tom Hyland* recently worked in Theatrical at [Palm Pictures](#) [35], an independent film distribution company. He currently runs an independent music booking and promotion company, [Dot Dash](#) [36].

[Jonathan Marlow](#) [37], a composer and filmmaker of moderate merit, occasionally writes on contemporary and historical film-related issues for a handful of publications.

Thoughts? Comments? Reactions? Suggestions? [Discuss!](#) [38]

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