

# Experimental Cinema, The Film Reader

## Introduction: Toward a New History of the Experimental Cinema

There is little room for playfulness or experimentation in contemporary mainstream filmmaking. The stakes are simply too high; the average film costs between \$50 and \$100 million, and all commercial films must recoup their backers' investment. Thus, the box-office driven spectacles produced by Hollywood are triumphs of marketing, not imagination. Art-house films and independent films have little hope of finding an audience because of changes in distribution patterns (VHS, DVD, and cable) and the increasing conglomeration of Hollywood. Nevertheless, there is and always has been a body of film art that exists outside the confines of commercial production. Experimental cineastes don't set out to please an audience of marketing executives: they give no thought to the pressures of opening-weekend grosses, nor do they try to manipulate, or even please, the masses. Their films find their own audiences and operate entirely outside of the value system that we have come to know as the Hollywood construct.

Robert Bresson writes that there are two types of films, "those that use the camera in order to *reproduce*; and those that employ the resources of cinematography to *create*" (1975: 2). Creativity requires breathing room for its playfulness. Perhaps nothing liberates the film artist more than freedom from the obligation to please market researchers and massive audiences. Filmic creativity is often actually fueled by a lack of resources. A case in point is Sadie Benning, who, at the age of 15, picked up a children's toy—a Fisher Price Pixelvision camera—and invented an entirely new type of personal experimental film that used the inherent image distortion of the primitive video camera as an artistic asset. Often less is more, if one respects the individual creative spirit rather than adheres to the constraints of genre.

In the late 1800s, when the cinema was first invented, filmmakers toyed with the new art form they had created. They hand cranked the film at variable speeds through the camera and discovered the magic that the cinema had to offer. People and objects could be made to disappear, fly through the air, and change shape at will. Inanimate objects could come to life through the magic of stop-motion animation. Alice Guy Blaché and other early filmmakers experimented with frame-by-frame hand tinting to create color films and experimented with sound; early attempts at sound recording were made using a wax cylinder to synchronize picture and sound. The surrealists also stretched the supposed limitations of the new art form, constructing radically inventive editing techniques and ignoring the requirements of conventional

narrative, to create “cinemoems” of anarchic beauty. Dziga Vertov and his students in the former Soviet Union invented rapid montage editing out of necessity. Denied access to raw stock to shoot new films, they learned how to cut film by re-editing D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of A Nation* (1915) in short bursts of hyperedited frames, a style of editing that would become the hallmark of Soviet silent cinema.

Experimental filmmakers physically “attacked the film” by scratching it, baking it, dyeing it, using outdated stock—both when economically necessary and by deliberate design—to create a tactile viewing experience that would repeatedly remind the audience throughout the projection that they were witnessing a plastic construct, a creation of light and shadow, in which the syntactical properties of the cinematic medium were always an aesthetic consideration. Filmmakers will always find ways of playing with film and video. For those unfamiliar with the large body of work in experimental cinema, there exists a treasure trove of film to be experienced, a deeply personal cinema that is as varied as it is playful and imaginative. These films are self-distributed or distributed by a small but dedicated group of truly independent distributors. They are regularly screened at museums, in classrooms, in living rooms, and on the web.

Mainstream filmmakers know about these films but do little to promote their existence; each of these films represents the individual vision of one person and is not the product of a media conglomerate’s edict. Commercial filmmakers have borrowed from experimentalists many innovative approaches to filmmaking and cinematography, but what they usually appropriate is merely *style* rather than *content*. Creative artistry is thus transformed into a wholly commercial product. A good case in point is the manner in which MTV and television commercials regularly use editing and graphic design techniques that were invented by experimental filmmakers, without the subtext inherent in the original films. The difference is that these images and techniques are used not for a *purpose* but for a stylized effect on MTV. Commercial television and cinema increasingly offer viewers a digitized universe, a product designed solely for consumption rather than for contemplation or enlightenment. This exploitation of experimental film makes it even more essential that it is studied, understood, and supported.

This book brings together a wide range of critical essays on American and European experimental cinema but focuses, for the most part, on American developments within the movement while placing them within the larger context of the European and Russian experimental cinema that predated and, to a large degree, informed the American movement. The intent of the volume, which traces the movement from the 1920s to the present, using critical and historical essays, as well as interviews with key figures in the movement, is to represent diverse critical approaches to experimental cinema. The reader is divided into four parts: Part One, Origins of the American Avant-garde Cinema, 1920–1959, traces the rise of the American experimental cinema from its birthplace in France, Germany, and Russia and then moves on to the avant-garde American filmmakers who, between 1921 and 1943, were working in response to the European movement of the 1920s. The rest of the first section is a series of essays covering American experimental filmmaking, on both the East and West Coasts, in the 1940s and 1950s. These essays lead to a detailed examination of the 1960s American experimental cinema as a whole, from its early romantic and anarchic roots through the formalist structuralism of Michael Snow and others in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Part Two, The 1960s Experimental Cinema Explosion, and Part Three, Structuralism in the 1970s. Finally, the volume concludes with Part Four, Alternative Cinemas, 1980–2000, a series of essays and interviews covering more recent experimental cinema, particularly African-American and queer cinema from the 1980s to the present.

While this reader covers many of the experimental movement’s major figures, including Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas, and others, the volume also examines American experimental filmmakers whose work is often excluded from the experimental film canon, including Barbara Rubin, Robert Nelson, Ben Van Meter, Gerard Malanga, Jud Yalkut, Scott Bartlett, and many others. All of these film artists share one thing: a highly personal and deeply felt vision of a new and anarchic way of looking at film and video, fueled by the inexhaustible romanticism of the era and by the fact that film and video were both very “cheap” media in which to work during the 1940s through the 1960s. The camera of choice for the experimental filmmaker was the Bolex, a lightweight, spring-wound camera, which was sturdy, portable, and capable of yielding professional results in the right hands. Film was inexpensive: a 100-foot roll of black-and-white film was \$2; color film, \$5. Processing cost two or three cents per foot. Filmmakers would often band together to purchase raw stock in bulk, or they would use outdated film that professional companies would simply throw away. Many experimental films were shot completely silent, with soundtracks of music and effects added later.

Thus, even in the late 1960s, one could make a 16mm 15-minute black-and-white sound film for as little as \$200; if one had the *desire* to do it, anyone could make a film. These filmmakers also disdained, for the most part, the Hollywood model of slick professionalism in lighting, acting, sets, costume design, and other physical production details. The avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s and 1940s aspired to a certain level of studio gloss in their work, but by the 1950s and 1960s, the “Beat” and “underground” filmmakers in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles were all embracing the idea that avant-garde films should be rough, raw, and imperfect. These were outlaw works, created at the margins of society. It seemed perfectly natural to make a film for *oneself* as the audience and to ignore both the established film critics and the normal distribution channels. Thus, throughout the history of experimental cinema, various communities developed, each of which provided distribution facilities, screening venues, and the spiritual and financial support necessary to the communal enterprise of filmmaking.

## Beginnings of the Avant-garde

In the 1920s and 1930s, the work of a community of French surrealists and dadaists, such as Jean Cocteau, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and René Clair, inspired the American experimental filmmakers to abandon the constraints of narrative and to create something more ambitious: the cinemoem. Man Ray’s *Le Retour à la raison* (1923), Dimitri Kirsanov’s *Ménilmontant* (1926), Fernand Léger’s *Ballet mécanique* (1924), Marcel Duchamp’s *Anémic cinéma* (1926), and René Clair’s *Entr’acte* (1924) heralded the birth of a new freedom in the cinema, wherein narrative became secondary to visual poetry and the individual concerns of the artist.

Man Ray’s *Le Retour à la raison*, for example, was created by sprinkling salt and pepper, along with thumbtacks and whatever other materials might be handy, directly onto the unexposed film with some fragmentary photographed visuals spliced in at random intervals. Kirsanov’s *Ménilmontant*, a highly poetic tale of two young women struggling to survive in the slums of Paris, opens with a staggering display of editing in which an ax murder is depicted in a series of rapid shots that directly mimic the violence of the act itself, prefiguring in many ways Alfred Hitchcock’s handling of similar material in *Psycho* (1960). Léger’s *Ballet mécanique*, with its incessant loops of a woman walking up a flight of stairs, repeated again and again until the human body itself becomes a mere mechanism, endlessly replicating the same movements, prefigured the

structuralist films that would eventually blossom in the late 1960s. Clair's *Entr'acte*, in which a funeral procession famously becomes a chase and eventually a roller-coaster ride, is another collection of absurdist segments in a film that deliberately seeks to avoid concrete interpretation, leaving it to the audience to divine the filmmaker's true intent.

The sense of liberation created by these early experimentalists was soon transported through the medium of international screenings to ciné clubs in the United States, where independent filmmakers eagerly embraced this newfound freedom, even as Hollywood, predictably, stuck to direct, narrative-driven representational films, which mainstream audiences had come to expect from the major studios. All of these independent artists shared one trait: although they screened their films for each other and assisted each other with production chores, each filmmaker was guided solely by her or his own vision, not by the desire to create a film for an audience. Each filmmaker had an individual style and approach to the material that made her or his films uniquely that filmmaker's alone. Thus, these films resist categorization and do not fall within the confines of established genres. The independent filmmaker creates films because of an internal drive to do so; the films discussed in this volume are the unique creations of artists who fought to express their vision on the screen, using whatever equipment came to hand, working on nonexistent budgets.

Jan-Christopher Horak, in his essay in this volume, "The First American Film Avant-garde, 1919–1945," goes into great detail on the lives and works of these early American experimentalists, demonstrating that this first community of avant-garde filmmakers had a range and depth of cinematic discourse that has often been ignored. Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand created *Manhatta* (1921), an impressionist view of New York City, using distorting lenses and rapid cuts to convey the frenzy of the metropolis. In 1928, émigrés Slavko Vorkapich and Robert Florey directed the groundbreaking American experimental short silent film *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra*, which documented how the dreams of an aspiring actor are destroyed by the crushing weight of the studio system, on a minuscule budget. Ironically, both Vorkapich and Florey later became part of the Hollywood community, along with their photographer on the film, the legendary Gregg Toland, who eventually photographed Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941). James Watson and Melville Webber created *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and their first sound film, *Lot in Sodom* (1933), by using abstraction, symbolic structures, and experimental sound techniques to create harrowingly personal visions of societal collapse.

From the early 1940s to the late 1950s, numerous independent filmmakers created a series of personal and uncompromising films that would define a new generation. Jonas Mekas's essay, "Notes on the New American Cinema," captures much of the energy of this turbulent era, while Lauren Rabinovitz, in "The Woman Filmmaker in the New York Avant-garde," demonstrates that the movement was not as egalitarian as it seemed at first glance. Judith Mayne also offers a feminist counterperspective in her essay "Women in the Avant-garde: Germaine Dulac, Maya Deren, Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, and Trinh T. Minh-ha," demonstrating that women and men have continually pursued differing avenues of expression in their works. Maya Deren, for example, became the first independent filmmaker to successfully exhibit her work, including perhaps her most famous film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), a sexual meditation on the role of women in the domestic sphere of 1940s America. In creating these early expressionist works, Deren was joined by a community of filmmakers who also sought to bring their own vision to the screen.

Marie Menken began her career as a filmmaker during World War II, working for the Signal Corps between 1941 and 1945. During her tenure in the military, Menken created and

photographed miniature sets for military training films. She later created the animated chess sequence for filmmaker Maya Deren's *At Land* (1944), and photographed *Geography of the Body* (1943) for her husband, Willard Maas. As the fifties progressed, Menken made an entrancing series of short films, including *Dwightiana* (1959), a brief animated short film in which beads, stones, and other everyday objects take on a life of their own; *Hurry! Hurry!* (1957), in which human sperm die in the attempt to replicate human life, set to a soundtrack of continuous bombing; and the lyrical and graceful *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957), in which Menken's camera sweeps through a small backyard garden as if imitating the point of view of a bird; the soundtrack of the film is comprised solely of continual birdsong (Brakhage 1989: 33–48).

Mary Ellen Bute was the first filmmaker to use electronically generated images, utilizing the output of a cathode ray oscilloscope. She named this process "abstronics," which signified a wedding of abstract and electronic forms (Foster 1995: 58–60). Many contemporary developments in computer technology in the cinema represent direct outgrowths of Bute's work. Sara Kathryn Arledge, working on the West Coast in the 1940s, created *Introspection* (1941–46), an abstract vision of the human body that has much in common with works by Menken and Maas. Arledge's 1958 film *What Is a Man?* is an exploration of the relationships between women and men in life and art. The film presents the viewer with then-revolutionary images of the nude human body as a site of performance and pleasure with a directness that is fresh and original. Arledge was a pioneer in this area, making films that were uncompromising in their graphic nudity, depicting sexuality as a basic human fact rather than relegating physical desire to the pornographic zone of the forbidden. Arledge's work directly tackles the issues of filmed sexual performativity and transcends the mere documentation of human sexuality through the mediation of her humanist gaze (Dixon 1997: 10–16). In addition, animator Harry Smith created a series of remarkable abstract animations in the late 1940s, and Kenneth Anger made his debut as a filmmaker with *Fireworks* (1947). The groundbreaking work done by these filmmakers freed the cinema of many of its imagistic and narrative constraints, but a new wave of filmmakers took this liberating impulse even further in the late 1950s, as part of the Beat cinema.

## The Beat Filmmakers

The Beats were a group of poets, musicians, painters, sculptors, and filmmakers who rejected the materialism of post-World War II America in favor of a simpler lifestyle, living in cheap apartments, staging poetry readings, happenings, and film screenings almost as clandestine affairs for members of their closed community. As with the 1920s and 1940s experimental film communities, the Beat artists flourished on both coasts in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the centers of activity located in New York City and San Francisco.

The archetypal West Coast Beat film, *The Flower Thief* (1960), directed by Ron Rice, exemplifies this rejection of conventional values in every aspect of its production. Shot on a nonexistent budget, using severely outdated 50-foot cartridges of World War II surplus gunnery film as raw stock, *The Flower Thief* follows actor-performer Taylor Mead, the Charlie Chaplin of the 1960s underground, on a series of picaresque adventures in and around San Francisco. The film has little plot and needs none; the title of the film derives from a random incident in which Mead steals a flower from a street vendor and then fantasizes that the police are about to arrest him for his crime. Escaping down the steep San Francisco streets in a Radio Flyer—a child's wagon—desperately clutching his much-abused teddy bear, Mead is at once pathetic and endearing,

projecting an image of holy foolishness on the screen. As the film progresses through its 75-minute running time, Mead interacts with groups of roving beatniks, schoolchildren, jazz musicians, and North Beach hustlers to create a portrait of a man unfettered by the constraints of society. The soundtrack is an asynchronous mélange of Beat poetry, jazz music, and Serge Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, recorded on a primitive reel-to-reel tape machine. Considered perhaps the most uncompromising and genuinely avant-garde feature film of the early 1960s, *The Flower Thief* is a paean to the plight of the outsider in a world that is both unresponsive and unyielding.

Vernon Zimmerman's satiric *Lemon Hearts* (1960) is a 16mm 30-minute film produced on the astoundingly low budget of \$50 (Sargeant 1997: 88). Taylor Mead plays *eleven* roles in this entirely improvised film, as he drifts aimlessly through the ruins of a series of soon-to-be-demolished Victorian houses, sometimes appearing in drag, sometimes in blue jeans and a sweatshirt. The soundtrack is once again pirated from jazz records, interspersed with Mead's own Beat poetry ("Oh God, oh God, my feet smell . . . I pissed on Jane Wyman's picture"). With his gracefully languid nymphlike body and a blissfully blank expression, Mead creates the perfect picture of absolute innocence in a hopelessly corrupt universe. Other Beat films from this period include Dick Higgins's *Flaming City* (1963), a hard-edged epic about Manhattan life on the margins, and Christopher MacLaine's short films *Beat* (1958), *The Man Who Invented Gold* (1957), *Scotch Hop* (1959), and *The End* (1953), which document the San Francisco Beat milieu. All of these films provide a tantalizing peek into the world of a vanished yet still influential subculture (Brakhage 1989: 115–28) and prefigured the major work that was to come in the following decade.

## The 1960s Explosion

The 1960s are justly celebrated as a veritable renaissance period in experimental cinema, in which some of the most influential avant-garde works were produced. The Kennedy assassination and the advent of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, together with the influence of such counter-culture figures as Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, Lenore Kandel, and Abbie Hoffman, signaled a new openness in American culture. People began to reassess 1950s values, which had once been unquestioningly accepted, and an entire new wave of experimental cinema was born. Filmmakers in the 1960s, working in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, created sophisticated distribution and screening outlets, especially the Filmmakers' Cooperative (a distribution facility) and the Filmmakers' Cinematheque (a film theatre, which changed locations numerous times) in New York, and Canyon Cinema in San Francisco. Both Canyon Cinema and the Filmmakers' Cooperative had one guiding principle in their initial bylaws: anyone could become a member simply by placing his or her films in distribution. There were no censorship or "selection" criteria of any kind, and anyone who had a film to screen was welcomed, regardless of the film's content, style, or production values. Thus, Canyon and the Cooperative acknowledged that, above all, the 1960s experimental cinema artist was a free agent, answerable only to her/himself. Previously applied standards were swept away, and an entirely new style of raw, tactile, "funk" filmmaking appeared.

Again filmmakers physically attacked the film, scratching it, baking it, dyeing it, using outdated stock when economically necessary or by deliberate design, to create a tactile viewing experience that reminded the audience repeatedly throughout the projection that they were witnessing a plastic construct, a creation of light and shadow, in which the syntactical properties of the

cinematic medium were always an aesthetic consideration. Many mainstream approaches to commercial filmmaking and cinematography are appropriated from experimental filmmakers, including light flares, punch holes, leader streaking, and the defiant sloppiness of the 1960s avant-garde, when filmmakers sought to embrace the mistakes in their work and delighted in unexpected superimpositions and the chance manipulations of random editing, echoing the syntactical structures popularized by the composer John Cage and others. In addition, these filmmakers tackled themes of race relations, sexuality, drugs, social conventions, and other topics that the conventional cinema consciously avoided. More than anything else, the experimental cinema of the 1960s was an advocate for social change and complete artistic freedom.

Major figures of the 1960s are individually examined in the essays included in Part II of this reader: in "Pop, Queer, or Fascist? The Ambiguity of Mass Culture in Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*," Juan A. Suarez discusses Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963); Suranjan Ganguly interviews the prolific filmmaker Stan Brakhage in "Stan Brakhage: The 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday Interview"; Jerry Tartaglia examines the pioneering queer vision of filmmaker Jack Smith in "The Perfect Queer Appositeness of Jack Smith"; Kate Haug offers "An Interview with Carolee Schneemann," the performance artist; Reva Wolf's contribution, "*The Flower Thief*: The 'Film Poem,' Warhol's Early Films, and the Beat Writers," demonstrates how Andy Warhol's films owed a debt to the spiritual freedom personified by the Beat filmmakers; and Daryl Chin, in "Walking on Thin Ice: The Films of Yoko Ono," and Yoko Ono herself, in "Yoko Ono on Yoko Ono," discuss Ono's films.

Yet in addition to these artists, there were a number of other influential figures in the 1960s who deserve mention. Since these artists are not examined in detail in the text of this volume, we offer a few brief observations on their works here. As was the case with members of the previous experimental communities, each of these filmmakers had an entirely original way of dealing with the possibilities the medium afforded; some were animators, some romantic diarists, and some pop satirists. Their visual styling is unique and immediately recognizable, and although they all worked during the same era, their films are one of a kind. Unlike the Hollywood genres, such as the western, the musical, the horror film, the war film, and the like, avant-garde films belong to no specific genre and thus make unique demands upon their audiences.

New York animator Robert Breer's works, for example, are elaborately structured free-form affairs that either tease the audience with abstractions that gradually take on recognizable form or assault the audience with a collage of single-frame imagery, in which each image is entirely unrelated to the one preceding or succeeding it. Breer's first film using unrelated, continuous images was *Images by Images I* (1954); a mere 10 seconds long, the film is a succession of 240 stills. *Jamestown Balloos* (1957) is a collage film that incorporates seemingly disparate images into a mysteriously coherent whole; *A Man and His Dog out for Air* (1957) offers the viewer a pulsating, abstract line drawing that momentarily metamorphoses into an image of a man walking his dog at the film's conclusion. *Homage to Jean Tinguely's Homage to New York* (1968) is a document of Jean Tinguely's self-destructing sculpture performance in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art. Breer returned to line animations with *Inner and Outer Space* (1960) and to image-collage films with *Blazes* (1961), *Horse over Teakettle* (1962), *Pat's Birthday* (1962), *Breathing* (1963), *Fist Fight* (1964), and *66* (1966). Breer's *69* (1969) remains one of the artist's most accomplished works. Basic geometric shapes are rotated against a background of constantly changing colors. As the film progresses, the drawings intertwine, forming new configurations, interspersed with sections of black leader that divide the film into stylistic segments (Renan 1967: 129–133).

The works of New York 1960s artists Shirley Clarke and Maya Deren are well known and discussed in detail in this volume, but the films of one of their most talented contemporaries,

Storm de Hirsch, are often marginalized. De Hirsch's *Goodbye in the Mirror* (1964), to pick just one film from de Hirsch's considerable body of work, is a 35mm feature film shot in Rome that deals with the lives of three young American women living abroad. Other de Hirsch films include the brief abstract animation film *Trap Dance* (1968), in which the images are scratched directly onto the film with surgical instruments; and *Shaman: A Tapestry for Sorcerers* (1966), which extends the filmmaker's body into the performance space of the film frame as de Hirsch photographs herself, nude, through a variety of prismatic lenses and diffusion filters, presenting her body to the audience as the site of ritualistic display (Dixon 1997: 42–45).

The poet Gerard Malanga, perhaps best known as Andy Warhol's right-hand man during Warhol's most prolific and influential period as a filmmaker and painter, created a series of deeply romantic and poetic films of his own. In them, Malanga's onscreen persona of "the young poet" is foregrounded in each frame. Where Warhol's gaze was clinical and detached, Malanga's extravagant vision bursts forth in such films as *In Search of the Miraculous* (1967), an emotional, vivid poem of adoration for his then-fiancée, Bennedetta Barzini. One of Malanga's most ambitious works, the 60-minute, split-screen, two-projector, stereo-sound *Pre-Raphaelite Dream* (1968), documents the filmmaker's friends and extended family in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as they perform their lives for the camera (Dixon 1997: 107–112; Renan 1967: 203–205). Ed Emshwiller's dance films, especially *Dance Chromatic* (1959), *Lifelines* (1960), *Thanatopsis* (1962), and his epic film *Relativity* (1966), center on the body in motion, and particularly on dance as a location of celebration of the human desire for physical pleasure and self-expression.

New Yorker Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth* (1963), created when the filmmaker was only 18, is a 30-minute 16mm double-projection film in which two separate reels of images of the human body in the act of making love are superimposed, one on the other, to create a landscape of desire that remains one of the most audacious cultural statements of the 1960s. Rubin photographed the images for the film in a free-form, documentary manner and then cut the developed reels of film into short strips, threw them into a basket, and drew the individual shots out one by one, splicing them together in random order. When the film was completed, Rubin instructed the projectionist to run the reels in any order, forward or backward, and put colored strips of plastic in front of the projector lens at random intervals during screenings of the work (Mekas 1972: 174–175).

Jud Yalkut's *Kusama's Self-Obliteration* (1967) offers us a vision of the Japanese performance artist Yayoi Kusama engaged in a "self-obliteration" ritual, in which she paints dots of color on leaves, animals, various other objects, and finally on a group of people ecstatically copulating in one of Kusama's endlessly mirrored "Infinity Chambers"; they carry on making love, seemingly oblivious to Kusama's painterly brushstrokes being applied to their naked skin. By linking nature in the form of trees, flowers, grass, and animals to the human experience of performative re/production, Kusama demonstrates that individual identity is mediated by the performative act of "self-obliteration," in which individuality is subsumed in the larger fabric of shared existence (Dixon 1997: 193–194).

Stan Vanderbeek's experimental films anticipated many of the techniques we now take for granted in the cinema: computer imagery, the use of specialized projection environments in which to show his films and videotapes, collage animation from newspaper and magazine cutouts (which later became a staple on the *Monty Python* series), and compilation filmmaking, to name just a few of his contributions to the technological advancement of cinema. Vanderbeek even went so far as to build his own film theater, which he dubbed the "Moviedrome," a spherical structure in the woods near Stony Point, New York, where multiple projector presentations of

his works played for rapt audiences in the 1960s. Vanderbeek's early films include *What Who How* (1957), *Mankinda* (1957), *One* (1957), *Astral Man* (1957), *Ala Mode* (1958), *Three-Screen-Scene* (1958), and *Science Fiction* (1959), all films using collage cutout techniques to satirize the American consumer dream. *Achoo Mr Keroochev* (1959) is a 2-minute black-and-white sound film lampooning Soviet dictator Nikita Khrushchev: whenever Khrushchev starts to speak during a parade or at the United Nations, he gets hit over the head with a hammer (Dixon 1997: 164–172).

In San Francisco, pioneering video and film artist Scott Bartlett created a series of challenging and evocative films in the mid to late 1960s, fusing video and film techniques in such early classics as *Metanomen* (1966), *Off/On* (1967), and *Moon 1969* (1969). Often neglected today, Bartlett's work was revolutionary both in style and in content and pushed the limits of film and video in new and often unexpected directions. In *Metanomen*, he used black-and-white high-contrast cinematography to create a hauntingly bleak boy-meets-girl antinarrative set to a sitar soundtrack. *Off/On*, an abstract, nonnarrative cinepoem that is at once haunting and mysteriously seductive, is the first experimental film that truly combines film and video imagery in a coherent whole. *Off/On* is for the most part comprised of a series of repeating film and video loops, which Bartlett manipulates through various rephotographing and video colorization techniques to create an intense cybernetic journey that challenges both the physical consciousness and the aesthetic sensibilities of the viewer. In Bartlett's next film, *Moon 1969*, he explores the sensory limits of the viewer: the beginning moves slowly from complete blackness and blankness to glaring white, with aerial footage of an airport runway at night slowly washing in and out. *Moon 1969* proceeds through a series of tempo changes until it reaches stroboscope intensity in its final minutes; the film triumphantly concludes with a long shot of the sun reflected in the sand at the edge of a beach (Dixon 1997: 21–25; Youngblood 1970: 318–312).

West Coast funk filmmaker Robert Nelson's first film was the intentionally primitive *Plastic Haircut* (1963), a 15-minute black-and-white short thrown together from a large quantity of material that Nelson shot of himself and his friends Ron Davis and William Wiley. This work was followed by Nelson's most famous film, *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965), an 11-minute film featuring members of the San Francisco Mime Troupe in a brutal burlesque of American racism. For the film's sound track, Steve Reich created a collage of stereotypically racist Stephen Foster songs, coupled with a repetitive chant of "Oh Dem Watermelons," as a series of watermelons are destroyed, disemboweled, and exploded by the multiracial cast on the screen to the general delight and amusement of the film's participants (Renan 1967: 171–174). Also working in San Francisco, Bruce Conner created a series of frenzied collage films, using bits of old newsreels, cartoons, timing leader, and other scraps of film to create the landmark film *Cosmic Ray* (1961), which many observers consider to be the first true music video, scored to the beat of Ray Charles's pop song "What'd I Say?" Conner's films *A Movie* (1958), which is composed entirely of stock footage from old newsreels, and *Report* (1963–1967), which documents the assassination of John F. Kennedy in harrowing fashion through the use of archival footage, created a new style of frenzied montage that became associated in the minds of many with the films of the American avant-garde (Brakhage 1989: 128–147). West Coast artist Bruce Baillie created a series of gently pastoral films during the early days of the Canyon Cinema Cooperative (which Baillie helped found), such as *To Parsifal* (1963), *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* (1963–1964) and *Quixote* (1964–1965), all of which celebrate indigenous American culture.

Finally, Ben Van Meter, a West Coast filmmaker most active in the 1960s, created a gorgeous series of films that celebrate the human body: *The Poon-Tang Trilogy* (1964), *Colorfilm* (1964–1965), *Olds-Mo-Bile* (1965), and his epic *Acid Mantra: Re-Birth of a Nation* (1966–1968),



1. Scott Bartlett's *Off/On* (1967). Courtesy Anthology Film Archives; reprinted by permission.

a 47-minute color and black-and-white work of such propulsive energy and intensity that viewing it is almost an exhausting experience. Starting with footage of various rock bands in concert, including the Velvet Underground and the Grateful Dead, the film superimposes as many as 10 layers of images simultaneously to engulf the viewer in a cornucopia of sight and sound, all leading up to a climactic orgy during a summer picnic at a party in the Bay area countryside. As the couples engage in ecstatic sexual unions, Van Meter hand drips blobs of colored paint directly on the film, as if to suggest the intensity of the energy that is being released by his performers. As the film ends, we see family units in the nude, swimming, playing Frisbee, relaxing, and walking in the tall grass (Dixon 1997: 172–176).

In all of these films, we see the element of *celebration* as key to the works' construction. Many of these films, especially Malanga's and Van Meter's, are deliberately anarchic, using over- and underexposure, multiple superimpositions, color and black-and-white film intercut at random intervals, and other aggressive visual strategies to delight and seduce the viewer. In addition, most of these filmmakers, both in New York and in Los Angeles, explored issues of sexuality with a candor that seems revolutionary even today, and made their films with a rough-and-ready abandon that recalls the "anything goes" strategy of Rice's film *The Flower Thief*. In many cases, these films were cut in the camera, with not one frame of film wasted in the editing process; the filmmakers would simply string the reels of exposed film together to form a longer work and then present it with an accompanying soundtrack. Other artists, such as Conner and Breer, took a more meticulous approach to their work, crafting their brief films with a sculptural intensity that was at that time unprecedented. Conner's *Cosmic Ray*, for example, contains numerous levels of superimposition throughout its 3-minute running time, and each level is edited with an almost manic intensity.

## The Structuralist Movement

In New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new form of filmmaking began to take precedence over the more anarchic, romantic 1960s experimentalists. Dubbed "structuralism," the movement had numerous precedents, including the often motionless work of Andy Warhol in his early films. But structuralism pushed Warhol's motionless-camera strategy even further; Warhol used a "star" system, and his films were often driven by the sheer force of his performers' personalities. For the structuralist filmmakers, form *became* content, and the editorial and visual method of presenting the image often took precedence over the content of the film itself. P. Adams Sitney, in his landmark essay included in this volume, "Structural Film," examines the early works of a number of structuralist filmmakers whose most influential productions were created between the late 1960s and the early 1980s.

Michael Snow, the Canadian-born film artist who created his most influential works in New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s, became the key figure of the structuralist movement. As Scott MacDonald notes in "Interview with Michael Snow" in Part Three of this volume, Snow came to filmmaking not through an apprenticeship in the cinema but rather through an interest in painting, sculpture, and photography. Snow's breakthrough film was *Wavelength* (1967), which took the art world by storm and introduced a series of formalist cinematic strategies that would dominate experimental film production for the next decade. In *Wavelength*, a camera zooms with excruciating slowness across an empty loft with four windows, starting with a wide-angle shot of the space and ending 45 minutes later with a close-up of a photograph on the far wall of

the room. Color filters are used throughout the film, along with different film stocks and a series of ghostly superimpositions. The jagged progress of Snow's zoom is interrupted by four actions: a cabinet is brought into the room; two women enter and listen to "Strawberry Fields Forever" on the radio; a man (Hollis Frampton) enters the frame space and then crumples to the floor, dead; finally, a young woman walks into the room, sees the man on the floor, and calls a friend to find out what she should do. Throughout the film there is a rising electronic pitch on the soundtrack, described by Snow as a "glissando," mixed in with the live sync-sound.

The critical impact of *Wavelength* was overwhelming. Many theoreticians considered it the most audaciously original experimental film ever produced and praised its rigorous attention to framing, color, and spatial detail. In Snow's subsequent films, including *One Second in Montreal* and *Back and Forth* (both 1969), Snow refined these strategies even further. *One Second in Montreal*, which is silent, is essentially a series of still photographs in which motion is imperceptible but nevertheless seems to occur over a long period of time. The shots lengthen in duration as the film progresses but then become shorter as the film concludes. The end result is mysterious and remarkable; it seems as if we have returned from a journey to a place where time and space have been immeasurably lengthened to create another dimension. *Back and Forth* is a much more brutal affair; for 52 minutes, the camera pans mechanically from left to right, then right to left, presenting the viewer with an ironic image of an empty classroom; as the film progresses, the pendulum motion of the camera speeds up until the classroom is simply a blur as the camera keeps whipping back and forth through space evermore frenetically. Just as the camera movement reaches its zenith, Snow cuts to a shot of the camera performing the same rapid back-and-forth pan motion, but this time from top to bottom and back again. Gradually, the camera slows down to show us the empty room as we saw it at the beginning of the film. Snow's next film was *La Region Central* (1971), a 3-hour epic in which Snow transported a specially designed camera on a moving crane to a mountaintop, turned the camera on, and then departed, leaving the camera to sweep through space photographing the sky, the earth, the sky, and the earth in a seemingly endless series of figure-eight configurations for the duration of the film. Much of the time, there is little or no image on the screen, and the unceasing movement of the camera makes the screen a space of constant, transfixing motion (Dixon 1997: 156–158).

Other members of the structuralist group include Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr, Warren Sonbert, and Joyce Wieland. Philip Lopate, in his essay, "The Films of Warren Sonbert," examines Sonbert's shift from a romantic diarist in the early 1960s to his more rigorous films of the 1970s and 1980s; while David Ehrenstein, in "Warren Sonbert Interview," allows Sonbert to discuss his evolution as an independent filmmaker. In the final essay of Part Three, Peter Gidal, a structuralist filmmaker in his own right, engages in a dialogue with filmmaker Hollis Frampton on his epic film *Zorns Lemma* (1970) in "An Interview with Hollis Frampton," and examines the film's carefully considered genesis in detail.

## Punk, Feminist, and Lesbian Cinema

As structuralism flourished, a backlash was building and brought about yet another radical shift in avant-garde experimental cinema practice. Super 8mm filmmakers Beth B. and Scott B., Nick Zedd, and other late 1970s–early 1980s punk cineastes created self-consciously brutal and anarchic films, which echoed the nihilist attitudes of such singers and pop groups as Patti

Smith and The Ramones. Punk films were made with minimal budgets and structured with deliberate technical crudity to alienate and/or enrage the spectator. Video cameras were in their infancy, but Super 8mm sound equipment was just starting to become available and at a fraction of the cost of 16mm. These new punk Super 8mm films were thus different in one essential factor from their 1960s 16mm ancestors: they were usually shot with lip-synchronous sound, a luxury that few independent filmmakers could previously have afforded. The image quality of Super 8mm was, naturally, not as clear as that of 16mm, but this, too, became part of the appeal; the punk films were raw, unrefined, and confrontational. Not surprisingly, the punk movement was based, for the most part, in New York City.

Nick Zedd, in particular, saw his films as a reaction to the work of the structuralists and consciously made "trash" films in Super 8mm with such titles as *They Eat Scum* (1979), *The Bogus Man* (1980), *Geek Maggot Bingo* (1983), and *The Wild World of Lydia Lunch* (1983). Punk filmmakers Beth B. and Scott B.'s *Letters to Dad* (1979) cuts across the norms of spectator pleasures as 19 people look and talk directly to the viewer, who, in effect, becomes "Dad." At the end of the film, the filmmakers reveal that the actors have been reading actual portions of letters to Jim Jones that were written just before the mass suicide at Jonestown. *Black Box* (1978) is a brutal allegory in which an anonymous man is abducted from his apartment and thrown into a hermetically sealed torture device that assaults him with loud noises and flashing lights, creating a hell from which he (and the viewer) can never escape (Foster 1995: 29–31).

In 1979, punk filmmaker Bette Gordon directed *Exchanges*, one of her first films to represent women as sexual subjects not objectified by a male gaze. In *Exchanges*, women exchange clothes with one another in a performance that displaces voyeuristic pleasure as it deconstructs the representation of the striptease. *Empty Suitcases* (1980) concerns a multidimensional female subject—a professor, mistress, terrorist, and suffering artist. Gordon takes on the ultimate objectification of women, pornography, in *Variety* (1983), scripted by novelist Kathy Acker. In *Variety*, Gordon turns the gendered subject-object position around and constructs a woman voyeur of male voyeurs. The woman in the film becomes obsessed with pornography because she works selling tickets in a porno theatre (Foster 1995: 151–154).

But the punk movement was not the only new wave in 1970s experimental cinema. Many feminist experimental films of the 1970s and 1980s are responses to Laura Mulvey's article, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," which called for interventionist strategies against voyeuristic pleasure, the objectifying male gaze, and the objectified female body. Yvonne Rainer is a New York-based lesbian filmmaker who has been actively dedicated to feminist countercinema since the 1960s. In *Lives of Performers* (1972) and *Film about a Woman Who . . .* (1974), Rainer plays with the language of dominant narrative cinema. *Lives of Performers* centers around a man and two women who play themselves as dancers working for an experimental filmmaker (not coincidentally) named Yvonne Rainer. Intertitles break up the narrative flow by self-reflectively calling into question our spectatorship position. The performers confront us with questions of identification, asking at one point, "Which woman is the director most sympathetic to?" Rainer's involvement in the criticism of spectatorship is directly linked to feminist critiques of traditional cinema's positioning of woman as object and man as spectator.

Rainer's later films, such as *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985) and *Privilege* (1990), move beyond purely cerebral investigation of spectatorship into a critique of pleasure in film viewing. *The Man Who Envied Women* makes reference to psychoanalytic and poststructural theorists, such as Michel Foucault and Fredric Jameson, within references to François Truffaut's film *The Man Who Loved Women* (1977) and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), for example, to

displace pleasurable viewing and move the audience into a critical stance. *Privilege* addresses film pleasure in the context of a discussion on menopause, lesbian sexuality, and women's community. Intertitles throughout the film display Rainer's distinct philosophical sense of humor: "Utopia: the more impossible it seems, the more necessary it becomes" (Foster 1995: 313–316).

Barbara Hammer made her first 16mm film, *I Was/I Am*, in 1973. The film re-enacts Hammer's coming out, showing her in a "feminine" gown wearing a crown and then as a "motorcycle dyke." In these early films, Hammer was directly influenced by the dream imagery of pioneering feminist filmmaker Maya Deren. *Dyketactics* (1974), *X* (1974), *Women I Love* (1976), and *Double Strength* (1978) loosely fall into the category of diary films of lesbian sexualities. Hammer's erotic films were some of the first images of lesbian lovemaking made by and for lesbian spectators. One of her best-known works is *Multiple Orgasm* (1977), which shows a woman masturbating. Hammer appears as the filmmaker subject/object of her own camera gaze, using a hand-held camera to record the film's images. *Sanctus* (1990) and *Vital Signs* (1991) use manipulated images culled from found footage, including archival X-ray footage and clips from Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), intertwined with excerpts from Michel Foucault's text *The Birth of the Clinic* (Foster 1995: 168–173). In an interview with Gwendolyn Audrey Foster included in Part Four of this volume, "Re/Constructing Lesbian Auto/Biographies in *Tender Fictions* and *Nitrate Kisses*," Hammer discusses her 1992 and 1995 films.

The films of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich blur the boundaries of autobiography, documentary, and fantasy. Benning's disturbing video *A Place Called Lovely* (1991) captures the filmmaker's childhood memories of her violent neighborhood, while *Living Inside* (1989) examines the difficulties of being queer in a small town. *It Wasn't Love* (1992) is a send-up of such Hollywood movies as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). The narrative focuses on two young girls running away together in defiance of patriarchal social norms. Characters in Benning's feature-length film, *Flat Is Beautiful* (1995), wear handmade paper masks throughout the film. The unnerving mixture of live action with the artifice of the grotesque masks makes the film at once surreal and directly accessible to the viewer.

Su Friedrich displays an uncanny ability to play with cinematic norms. Her early works are autobiographical and stylistically innovative, with frequent use of hand-scratched titles on black leader and appropriated female imagery. The autobiographical *Sink or Swim* (1990) is told through the point of view of a girl who recounts memories of her childhood. Friedrich juxtaposes images from family vacations with a voice-over of the young woman, who comes to the conclusion that her father cared more for his career than for his family. *The Ties That Bind* (1984) examines the life of Friedrich's mother, who lived in Nazi Germany during the war. The mother's voice provides the running voice-over narrative, which Friedrich punctuates with etch-lettered questions from the daughter. *Damned If You Don't* (1987) is an experimental narrative film exploring a nun's losing battle with her own lesbian sexual desire. Chris Holmlund, in her essay "The Films of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich," dubs the work of Benning and Friedrich "dyke docs" and examines their importance as representations of lesbian cinema.

## Alternative Cinemas

In the 1980s and 1990s, African-American experimental women filmmakers began to make significant inroads into experimental film production. African-American women were involved in independent film production as early as the 1930s, when Eloyce Gist, a black evangelist,

directed and self-distributed such films as *Hell Bound Train* (1932) and *Verdict Not Guilty* (1932–1933). Such scholars as Pearl Bowser, Jacqueline Bobo, and Alexandra Juhasz are actively uncovering the lineage of previously unknown, neglected, forgotten, or marginalized black women directors. Grouping black women directors may seem essentialist at first glance; however, as Gloria J. Gibson demonstrates in her essay, "Black Women's Independent Cinema," these films display a consistent black feminist cultural ideology, even as they are drawn from a multiplicity of personal and cultural experiences. One commonality that black women filmmakers face, however, is essentialist by nature: race and gender discrimination. Another commonality among black women filmmakers is the desire to represent images that are oppositional and corrective to Hollywood stereotypes, silences, and omissions. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, studied anthropology and subsequently made a series of independent experimental documentary films on the lives of African-Americans. Her films break the rules of observational documentary as she interacts with her subjects as a coparticipant. Similarly, Camille Billops developed a performative and deeply personal approach to personal documentary with such films as *Finding Christa* (1991) and *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1982), both codirected with James V. Hatch.

Michelle Parkerson released *Storme: The Lady of the Jewel Box* (1987), a portrait of female-to-male drag king Storme DeLarverie. In 1979, Alile Sharon Larkin self-produced *A Different Image*, with the aid of the Black Filmmakers' Foundation, which she cofounded. Larkin's experimental films explore the history of black female representation, as do the films of Maureen Blackwood, a black British director who cofounded Sankofa, a black British film collective. Blackwood's *Perfect Image?* (1988) uses experimental film techniques to explore and expose stereotypes of black women (Dixon 1995–1996: 131–143). One of the strongest voices in this area is that of Ngozi Onwurah, another black British filmmaker, whose *And Still I Rise* (1993) critiques colonialist documentary practice. *Coffee Colored Children* (1988) and *The Body Beautiful* explore black corporeal space as they blur boundaries between experimental, autobiographical, and documentary cinema (Foster 1997a: 24–42).

During the 1980s and 1990s, queer cinema also saw a rise in production and distribution. Derek Jarman's highly personal and experimental films, including *The Last of England* (1987), *Queer Edward II* (1991), and *Caravaggio* (1986), consolidated his reputation as one of the foremost queer cinema artists of the twentieth century. Richly detailed and vividly colorful (Jarman began his career as a production designer for director Ken Russell), Jarman's films synthesize Super 8mm home movies, gay erotica, and staged narrative sequences, moving easily across time and space to create multilevel works that are at once theatrical and intensely visual. Diagnosed with AIDS in the early 1990s, Jarman faced his own impending blindness with *Blue* (1993), a film composed solely of a fixed blue screen accompanied by Jarman's autobiographical narration. Jarman's death in 1994 dealt a great blow to the experimental film world and the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community. Nevertheless, his films continue to inform and inspire the work of other filmmakers (see Lippard 1996).

Queer cinema in the 1990s was energized by gay collectivism, activism, and the fight against AIDS. Perhaps no films have been as controversial as those of Isaac Julien and Marlon Riggs. The final essay of Part Four, Kobena Mercer's "Dark and Lovely Too: Black Gay Men in Independent Film," explores identity issues in the films of Marlon Riggs and Isaac Julien. Mercer, like many queer theorists, dislodges essentialist and overdetermined categories of identity. Mercer explains that identities are not necessarily biologically constructed, but rather culturally performed. Experimental filmmakers and queer theorists have been wrestling with identity



markers and their meanings because of the rise of political activism and alliances across such identity markers as race, class, and sexuality, especially at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Because of the rise in experimental filmmaking in the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century, it would be impossible to mention every significant experimental filmmaker of the contemporary era, just as it is impossible to catalogue the enormous number of deeply personal, experimental, and independent filmmakers of the past. Instead, this volume is designed to offer the reader some signposts to guide them through the plethora of experimental films and their makers. As this introduction demonstrates, independent filmmakers thrive where there is community. In the digital age, experimental filmmakers are finding one another in enclaves in New York, Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, and in small towns and communities around the world. While distribution still poses significant challenges, self-distribution on the web is on the rise. Museums and colleges are responding to a renewed interest from young people who are searching for an authentic personal cinema and finding out about experimental films and filmmakers.

What we hope to accomplish with this volume, then, is an introduction to the debate and practice of experimental cinema, from the 1920s to the present, demonstrating how it remains always slightly ahead of the curve, tackling subjects that the mainstream cinema finds either taboo or unprofitable. The experimental cinema is a cinema of poets and artists who strive to create personal works in a medium that is both expensive and ephemeral. But the vitality of their vision can be measured by the influence their films have on those who view these alternative visions, which show us a life beyond that offered by the commercial cinema. Experimental cinema, finally, is the domain of the personal, rather than the corporate, vision. It is this individuality and uncompromising honesty that this reader explores and celebrates.