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Film and Video

Experimental film and video has been a vexed and often unsatisfactory catchall classification for a range of creative and usually counterhegemonic practices throughout the history of the art of film and, later, video art. Although the term experimental film can refer to any innovative exploration of moving-image technologies that occurs across commercial and industrial media forms, the term has most often been used interchangeably with *avant-garde*, *underground*, *personal*, *poetic*, and *artist's film and video*. Many have expressed (with some justification) discomfort with the term experimental film, which can be, as film scholar P. Adams Sitney writes, "inaccurate, limiting [and] implies a tentative and secondary relationship to a more stable cinema" (Sitney, 2002, p. xi). Nonetheless, *experimental film* also implies an emphasis on process over mastery. The notion of *experiment* embraces the possibility of innovation and progress as an artistic ideal. Its scientific cast refers to artistic production as a process of invention that produces new knowledge. Politically, the term *experimental* acknowledges the need for constant critique and aesthetic transformation to better express the realities of the dynamic social discourse of which film practice is a part. In all cases "these utopian impulses give experimental and avant-garde film its enduring value—as a kind of non-aligned movement—existing as a passionate intersection between the film industry, cultural activism, the art world and academia" (Skoller, 2005, p. xxiv).

Fundamental to the notion of *experiment* is *experience*, in which the possibility of technological and formal innovation comes through direct interaction with the materials of film and video. In early cinema, lines between scientific research with the medium and aesthetic practice were often blurred. Such interconnection was central to the early conception of experimental filmmaking as a process of exploration and invention of a uniquely modern art form distinguishing it from the standardizing forms, techniques, and commodifi-

cation of the film industry. In this way, experimental film has stood as an implicit and even militant critique of the industrial modes of film production.

Some of the earliest experimental uses of moving-image technology came out of scientific study in kymography and chronophotography, motion study, and bodily analysis in the works of Pierre Jules César Janssen, Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne-Jules Marey, and Walter G. Chase. The use of film as a tool for scientific experimentation, as Lisa Cartwright has argued, contributed to the development of the aesthetics and conventions of popular cinema and the documentary. Although it was presumed that the public interest in Lumiere's early actuality films was with the realism of the images, it was rather in their demonstration of the work of the apparatus itself (Cartwright, 1995, pp. 2–4).

Early Experimental Film, Abstraction, Surrealism, Absolute Cinema. The links between scientific imaging and experimental film were more overt in later films, such as physician and filmmaker James Sibley Watson's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) with his use of X-ray cinematography and those of the French surrealist Jean Painlevé, who trained as a biologist and experimented with underwater cinematography. Known for his motto "science is fiction," he made more than two hundred short science and nature films between the 1920s and 1960s, blurring lines between observational natural science films and surrealist phantasmagorias.

Surrealist artists, particularly in France, experimented with film's plasticity and its unique ability to manipulate the representations of space and time, creating new narrative forms to more adequately address the limits of rationality and new modes of knowledge, such as experimental physics and psychoanalysis. The ability to move between the realism of the photographic moving image and the phantasmagorical imaginary allowed artists to experiment with narrative forms and invent ways to create poetic and visceral experiences of the unruly relationships between consciousness and unconscious desire. Important films in this vein include *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (1928) by Germaine Dulac, *Entr'acte* (1924) by René Clair, *Le Sang d'un Poète* by Jean Cocteau (1930), *À propos de Nice* by Jean Vigo (1930), and *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. *L'Age d'or* (1930), Buñuel's even more militantly experimental second film, scandalously worked to expose the hypocrisies of bourgeois civility and his *Las Hurdes* (1932), widely considered the first experimental documentary, satirized anthropological objectivity.

Other French visual artists of the period, including Marcel Duchamp, Ferdinand Léger, and László Moholy-Nagy, experimented with the film medium to explore the perceptual possibilities of projected light, movement, and time. The photographer Man Ray made perhaps the most radically experimental films of this sort. In his films, including *Le*

Retour à la Raison (1923), *Emak-Bakia* (1926), and *L'Etoile de Mer* (1928), he worked directly with the materials of film. He experimented with *cameraless* filmmaking, putting objects directly on the film and exposing them to light, creating the trace of nails, stick pins, thumbtacks, or springs. He foregrounded light and shadow, the grain of the film itself, intercut rhythmically with a range of images of modern life. These images are at once abstract, rhythmic, and recognizable and are only possible in the film medium.

This attention to medium specificity—identifying an essential “nature” of the medium—is another dominant trope of experimental film. This has been important to the development of cinema in which claims for its legitimization as a new art lay in defining and accessing a notion of “pure,” concrete, or “absolute” cinema that has little relation to dramatic or documentary-based film, but is rather a cinema that works with purely graphic, rhythmic, light, and color elements. Experiments with abstract graphic shape and line, rhythms of movement, and pure light—working with film’s plasticity rather than photographic realism—in which static drawings and color fields were animated emphasized the transformation of line, shape, and color over time in the search for the purest form of cinematic movement. This aspiration to discover a pure or absolute cinema through abstraction has connected experimental film to avant-garde practices across the visual arts. In Germany, experimental filmmakers Walter Ruttmann, Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter, and Oskar Fischinger were major exponents of absolute film.

Experimental animation practices have continued into the early twenty-first century, with filmmakers using a range of materials and technologies, such as cut-out and collage animation, pixilation, rotoscoping, scratching, painting and drawing directly on the film, and stop-action animation with puppets and clay. Video and digital imaging have been integrated into experimental animation, creating new forms of movement, textures, and transformations through electronic image processing beginning with the artist-built video synthesizer and extending to current graphics using CAD, 3D, and other digital processes. These films are often poetic, non-story based, abstract, musical, and associative; they emphasize the materials used and are allowed to move and transform in rhythmic and nonlinear ways.

The utopian aspiration to create a new visual language in cinema that was no longer based upon the adaptation of theatrical, literary, or journalistic conventions was strongly articulated by Soviet filmmakers as part of a revolutionary politics of form. Filmmakers from Vertov and Eisenstein to Dovzhenko and Kuleshov insisted that inventing a new cinematic language was necessary to create a revolutionary cinema that could adequately represent the ideas, events, and conditions of the new society. They developed and experimented with complex theories of montage to create an active and critically thinking spectator rather than the pas-

sive and seduced viewer of the dominant cinema of melodrama.

Dziga Vertov’s demand for an experimental film that could save cinema from its own doom by shedding its nineteenth-century literary and theatrical affectations was an integral part of the political project of the new participatory society of the Soviet Union. He declared in 1923 the need for experimentation and study of film as an antidote to the effects of bourgeois cinema that he characterized as

a loss of active thinking...an orientation toward the six-act psychodrama—ie., an orientation toward what’s behind you...Cinema’s system is poisoned with the terrible toxin of routine. We demand the opportunity to test the antidote we’ve found upon its dying body. We ask the unbelievers to see for themselves: we agree to test our medicine beforehand on “guinea pigs”—film etudes.

(Vertov, 1984, p. 20)

The modernist political avant-garde maintained that the aesthetics of film form, style, genre, and their conventions are an effect of historically determined social processes and not simply a product of individual expression. Therefore, the artistic vanguard must be socially engaged, putting aesthetic practice at the service of social and political change rather than the expression of a personal vision. As Vertov insisted, the politically committed experimental filmmaker must confront the dominant order by leading the way toward a transformative rethinking of the relationship of film to the social order.

Postwar Experimental Film: Artisanal, Underground, Personal Film. In the post-World War II period, these earlier areas of experimentation—medium specificity, the politics of aesthetics and form, surrealist and poetic explorations of consciousness, time, and space—often blended and widened into a diverse range of international practices, making experimental film even harder to define. In the United States and the United Kingdom, the emergence of small-gauge and home movie formats, such as 8mm, 16mm, and (by the late 1960s) portable video tape cameras, allowed individuals to experiment with film as a single-author medium. This mode of production reflects another defining aspect of modernist experimental film and video, that of its aspiration for autonomy from the critical and economic institutions of mainstream culture. As film and television became a more integral part of public discourse and increasingly centralized, experiments in individually, collectively authored, and independently produced media were articulated as a more democratic and authentically popular media culture—an alternative to the consumerist media of the for-profit, corporate culture industry.

In this largely artisanal mode of production most aspects of production, from financing and scripting to cinematography, sound recording, editing, and image manipulation or processing, are performed by the filmmaker, creating the most direct relationship an artist can have to this highly technological medium. This not only emerged from a lack of

economic support for noncommercial production, but by the 1960s was also articulated as a political and aesthetic stance intended as an implicit critique of the industrial modes of film production. Similarly, the distribution and exhibition of these films have been organized largely by the filmmakers themselves or by artist-run, not-for-profit production, distribution, or exhibition collectives such as the London Film Co-op, New York Filmmaker's Co-operative, and the San Francisco Cinematheque.

Small-gauge filmmakers of the American underground in the 1950s and 1960s not only continued earlier European traditions of abstract animation, nonnarrative, and surrealist film, but also experimented with uniquely personal and poetic forms such as the psychodrama, mythopoeia, the lyrical and autobiographical film (Sitney, 2002). Until recently experimental film was largely ignored by the mainstream art world and academic art history. Still, the filmmakers of the period continued to work collaboratively and in dialogue with other art movements of the time, integrating film and video into the other arts: from the abstract expressionist and lyrical film poems of Stan Brakhage and feminist performance films of Carolee Schneemann to the neo-surrealist psychodramas of Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, and Gregory Markopoulos and the Fluxus films of Yoko Ono; photography and conceptual art (Hollis Frampton); modern dance (Yvonne Rainer), sculpture and minimalism (Michael Snow and Paul Sharits); and performance art and theater (Jack Smith, Warhol, and the Kuchar Brothers).

The found footage film (Bruce Conner, Stan Vanderbeek, Ken Jacobs) transformed the static art of collage and the Duchampian ready-made into dynamic high-velocity explorations of media and pop culture and anticipated contemporary scratch mixing and the video mash-ups of the YouTube generation. Experimental filmmakers also rethought the ways film could be viewed, expanding cinema into multi-screen projections, in which shot-to-shot montage became multiple screen juxtapositions or moving paintings that could be seen as multiple panels or as moving backdrops for dance and performances. Experiments with film as sculptural installation incorporated the space of gallery into the work. The viewer became mobile, able to walk around or through the film projections, allowing multiple perspectives that decentered the fixed point of view of the film theater, prefiguring video installations in museums today.

Video Art and Grassroots Television. Many similar themes and concerns of experimental film were also preoccupations of experimental video art, particularly the exploration of the materiality of the medium and the aesthetics of modern visual and conceptual art, in distinction to commercial television, whose forms were largely adapted from theater and cinema. But this also gave rise to strong aesthetic differences that powerfully distinguished experimental video from film, in particular the exploration of live real-time

transmission of electronic images, both in broadcast and in closed-circuit contexts, the possibilities of immediate playback of images, and signal processing of electronic imagery.

Video scholar Yvonne Spielmann has described video's electronic pictoriality as *transformation imagery* (Spielmann, 2010, p. 4). She describes differences between the film image and the comparatively low resolution of the predigital video image through the inherent mutability of the electronic signal that has no fixed image trace that can be seen or projected, but rather a signal that can be transformed in multiple ways through a series of processors from video camera to video playback machines and finally display monitors. In this sense there is no inherent quality to video since it can be transformed through signal processing into any kind of image.

Spielmann and other video theorists have argued that, unlike film, video lacks an essential imagistic specificity that has defined artistic media in the past. Video's very mutability makes possible its extraordinary hybridization and adaptation to other technologies and art forms. This is what has made video art such a rich experimental medium integrated into sculpture, installation, theater/performance, and conceptual art (Nam June Paik, Joan Jonas, Vito Acconci). Early video experiments in *cameraless* image processing, synthesis, and video feedback foregrounded the purely electronic possibilities for video imagery (the Vasulkas, Whitney Brothers, Stephen Beck).

Portable video equipment with its immediate playback, sync-sound capabilities, and ease of use opened new possibilities for documentary, journalism, and political activism. Video artists and activists experimented with grassroots, bottom-up, community-based media as a countervoice to the "top-down" modes of commercial media production. In this context the video collective, rather than the individual author, was a mode of production. These collectives of video artists and political activists were rethinking television as a local medium that spoke directly to communities of interest (Peoples Video Theatre, TVTV, and later Paper Tiger/Deep-Dish TV and DIVA TV).

Activist video collectives experimented with new possibilities for integrating aesthetic strategies and creative expression in video and could play an important part in raising awareness of specific social and political problems, in that a wide range of voices and communities could be widely represented through media. This groundbreaking work set the stage for contemporary media activism and culture jamming, from community-access cable television to contemporary creative interventions on the Internet.

Praxis and the Politics of Form. The political and cultural ferment of the 1960s and 1970s deepened the question about what a political cinema meant. Parallel to populist grassroots media activism were the highly intellectual and theoretically experimental left-wing filmmakers of the

European art film. Filmmakers from Straub/Huillet and Jean-Luc Godard to Alexander Kluge, Chris Marker, and Guy Debord created a political cinema experimenting with new forms of cinematic spectatorship.

Informed by theories of Brechtian reflexivity and anti-illusionism, structuralist film theories such as semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminist, and apparatus theories, these filmmakers interrogated narrative illusionism and the ways ideology was embedded in the very form and machinery of cinema. In the quite different context of the revolutionary struggles of emerging postcolonial countries of the developing world, the revolutionary Third Cinemas, particularly in Cuba, Latin America, and Africa (Santiago Álvarez, Fernando Solanas, Ousmane Sembène), were similarly integrating theory and practice to experiment with different theoretical questions and modes of production. They created a new film practice outside of industry production values, what the Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa called "an imperfect cinema" in which each film's aesthetic was tactical, arising from the specific economic and political conditions in which the films are made. In the United States and the United Kingdom, experimental film continued to explore the politics of form. Alongside abstract, visionary underground practices, structural/materialist film informed by the artworld contexts of Greenbergian anti-illusionist theories and minimalist aesthetics emerged as a zero-degree exploration of the film medium itself. Like abstract expressionism and minimalist painting and sculpture, structural/materialist film is shown to be an object in itself and not simply a transparent medium that represents anything other than itself. In the United States, so-called structuralist filmmakers (Michael Snow, Ken Jacobs, Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr) often created films with predetermined formal structures that revealed processes of cinematic signification through their material elements: time, light, movement, film stock, lenses, light, relationships between language and image. Such films foregrounded the immediate experiential nature of film's materiality rather than cinema's representational abilities.

British structural/materialist filmmakers argued for an anti-illusionist form of filmmaking in which the display of representational and therefore illusionist content is replaced by the process of filmic material producing its own trace as light, movement, and duration (Malcolm Le Grice, Peter Gidal, Chris Welsby). For the structural/materialists, filmic representation is overdetermined by the dominant ideology of capitalist modes of production because the ideology is reproduced, reinforced, and naturalized within the historical relationship between the image and viewer. This can only be accomplished by breaking not only with the dominant conventions of cinematic meaning making, but also finally with representation itself (Gidal).

This kind of questioning of the politics of representation when informed by postcolonial, feminist, and queer theo-

ries opened onto experimental interrogations of the representations of ethnicity, race, and gender across cultures; it engendered a diverse range of experimental practices and theoretical explorations of identity among non-white, feminist, and queer artists and their communities (Isaac Julien, John Akomfrah, John Greyson, Chantal Akerman, Su Friedrich). Questions of self-representation and visibility on both sides of the camera by minority communities in the United States and Europe similarly informed experimental media practices emerging in the Middle East, Asia, and India (Lamia Joreige, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Raqs Media Collective).

Post-Medium and Hybrid Experimental Media. If medium specificity was at the center of modernist experimental film/video, it is the *post-medium condition* of hybrid forms and media convergences that has marked experimental film/video since the 1980s. Genre hybridization and the convergence of analog and digital technologies and their modes of production have transformed contemporary media practice. Hybrid forms such as the essay film, as it emerged from the work of Chris Marker and others, have further blurred the lines between the subjective vision of the personal film and the mixing of nonfiction social and political themes as a form of experimental writing with images, sounds, and text (Harun Farocki, Abigail Child, Daniel Eisenberg).

Such hybrid forms have become part of wider practices beyond the underground and art world in documentary animation, experimental ethnography, new forms of narrative, and storytelling, mixing documentary and dramatic fiction and re-creation. Experimental film and video have transformed commercial art spaces of the museum and galleries in screening rooms with video installation and film projections that are hybrids between sculpture, painting, and cinema and are now central to contemporary art (Douglas Gordon, Tacita Dean, Christian Marclay, Shirin Neshat). It is ironic that experimental film, whose ephemerality defied objecthood and questioned the commodification of art itself, now packaged and sold as a form of new media art, has become an integral part of the contemporary art market.

[See also Abstraction; Avant-Garde; Duchamp, Marcel; Film; Modernism; Narrative; Structuralism; Surrealism; and Video.]

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EXPRESSIONISM. As a historical artistic phenomenon, Expressionism is most frequently identified with the progressive, antinaturalistic art and literature of Germany and Austria during the years 1905 to 1920. Beyond this broad chronological and geographic identification, however, on such fundamental questions as who the Expressionist artists and writers were, or what stylistic and other criteria characterize an Expressionist work, there is little agreement. While such imprecision is not unusual in the definition of modern art movements, usually it appears in establishing the extent of a movement and its peripheries—whether it is appropriate to identify a Czech artist working in Prague with the Paris-centered movement of Cubism, for example—and seldom are essential defining qualities so disputed. Indeed, because of its imprecision, the very concept of Expressionism and its usability in systematic historical and critical

studies have been called into question repeatedly. Nonetheless, the concept refuses to disappear, and a review of its most widely accepted components and associated aesthetic theories or concepts is therefore useful.

In art history and literary criticism today, German Expressionism is linked initially to the artists groups *Brücke*, founded in Dresden in 1905 by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Fritz Bleyl, and *Der Blaue Reiter*, founded in Munich in 1911 by Vassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Gabriele Münter, and August Macke. This core is then extended to include the periodicals *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*—which sponsored exhibitions, and published and defended works by the artists of the two groups—and to other artists associated with them, as well as to writers whose poems, plays, novellas, and critical or theoretical essays were published in them. From this expanded core, since these artists and writers also joined or founded other groups, periodicals, and exhibition societies, the identification of German Expressionist works and artists is additively extended to incorporate others joining or appearing in these ventures. The height of German Expressionist activity and its greatest extension then appears during World War I, the November Revolution of 1918, and the initial years of the Weimar Republic; and 1920 is generally accepted as marking the end of Expressionism as a movement. Works by the various artists and authors associated with Expressionism, but produced after 1920, generally continue to be identified as Expressionist, however, as do other isolated individual pieces, and the concept of Expressionism is also extended to film, music, and politics, as well as to other countries. According to this prolonged chronology, the coming to power of Adolf Hitler in 1933, his anti-modern art politics, and the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich in 1937 definitively terminate the Expressionist movement.

It is an awkward and imprecise historical construct. Unlike Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism, "Expressionism" was a name very few artists employed to identify their work or a movement, and it was not—as Impressionism, Cubism, or Fauvism were—a name invented by critics but then accepted by many of the artists and their apologists. Moreover, ironically, it was Nazi opposition to, and propaganda against, modernist art, music, and literature that lent the term "Expressionism" its seemingly unshakable chronological and conceptual ambiguity while also extending its meaning into further indefinite realms of ideology and *weltanschauung*.

Although expression is a fundamental concept in art theory and aesthetics since antiquity, and the terms "expressionist" and "expressionism" appear sporadically in English, French, and German literary and art criticism since the mid-nineteenth century, not until around 1910 do these terms become frequently employed. Initially they were adopted in London by Roger Fry and critics supporting his first Postimpressionist exhibition in 1910–1911, as simple terminological indicators of a perceived stylistic antithesis to Impressionism