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Experimental film [avant-garde; fine art film]. Term referring to MOTION PICTURE FILMS that are distinguished by their concern to analyse and extend the medium, not only by means of new technology or subject-matter but also in terms of new formal or aesthetic ideas. Work of this kind is generally produced on a small budget and is screened in galleries and specialized venues; it maintains close links with avant-garde literature and art. The first decade of film making (after 1895) necessarily involved a great deal of experiment, although most participants saw film as a medium for entertainment rather than art. The work of two early French directors, Georges Méliès (1861–1938) and Emile Cohl (1857–1963), was later singled out by film makers. Méliès, a professional magician, showed the power of the film medium to transform time and space in *An Up-to-date Conjuror* (1899) and *Voyage to the Moon* (1902). In *The Joyous Microbes* (1909) Cohl demonstrated the linear freedom possible in film animation. In the 1910s and 1920s many artists associated with Modernism were drawn to film as a product of new technology and a medium unencumbered by tradition. It also offered artists the opportunity to animate their images. The Italian Futurists issued a manifesto about the possibilities of 'Futurist cinema' in 1916. The major Futurist films appear to have been lost, although an essay of 1912 by Bruno Corra (1892–1976) provided a detailed description of animation work. He and Arnaldo Ginna (1890–1982) bypassed the camera by painting directly on celluloid. Their work attracted so little attention that this method of direct film making was reinvented two decades later.

In the early 1920s artists in Germany developed the 'absolute' or 'non-objective' film. Their animated films featured geometrical forms that moved and changed rhythmically, and their titles implied a parallel between abstract art and music. Between 1921 and 1925 Walther Ruttmann (1887–1941) made *Opus One* to *Opus Four*, Viking Eggeling (1880–1925) made *Diagonal Symphony*; and Hans Richter (1888–1976) made *Rhythmus 21* and *Rhythmus 23*. Richter and Oskar W. Fischinger (1900–67) were the first to build up long careers as experimental film makers. Fischinger continued to develop new methods of animation, from his abstract studies of the 1920s to his film *Motion Painting No. 1* (1947), which followed the development of an oil painting through thousands of images. Other films of the 1920s demonstrated the variety of ways in which live action could be transformed by an artist's framing, editing and processing. In *Ballet mécanique* (1924) Fernand Léger (1881–1955) created an abstract vision of everyday

objects. His collaborators were the American cameraman Dudley Murphy (1897–1968) and the American composer Georges Antheil (1900–59). *Anemic Cinema* (1925) by Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) was an important forerunner of structural or conceptual film making. Duchamp based the film on his experiments with 3-D and kinetic sculpture. Many artists' films have similarly grown out of installations or kinetic sculpture, for example *Light-play: Black and White and Grey* (c. 1930) by László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946). Man Ray (1890–1976) created *Return to Reason* for a Dada event in 1923. The film was a vivid demonstration that the 'rayograph' method of making exposures directly on photographic paper without a camera could be applied to cinematography. Another notable Dada film was *Entr'acte* (1924) by Francis Picabia (1879–1953) and the French film maker René Clair (1898–1981) with the involvement of Ray, Duchamp and the composer Erik Satie (1866–1925). The Surrealists also took an intense interest in films, which they saw as closely related to dreams. The best-known Surrealist films included two made in 1928: *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, based by the French film maker Germaine Dulac (1882–1942) on a script by Antonin Artaud, and *Un Chien andalou* by the Spanish film maker Luis Buñuel (1900–82) and Salvador Dalí (1904–89), which began with the slicing of a person's eye, one of the best-known of all film images. Buñuel and Dalí's other film, *L'Âge d'or* (1930), was confiscated by the police.

By the late 1920s there were enough 'cine poems' or examples of 'pure cinema' to justify the claim that film had become a fully independent art. In Europe the audience was expanded by cine clubs, film societies and art cinemas. In the 1930s, however, experimental film making declined as Fascist governments suppressed modernism. Also, the introduction of sound had considerably increased the cost of film making. Some artists were able to fund abstract films set to music by including a sponsor's message. Such 'prestige commercials' were greeted by cinema audiences with a mixture of delight and bewilderment. Both Fischinger and Len Lye (1901–80) used this genre to experiment with the artistic possibilities of colour. Lye created new styles of direct or cameraless animation as he painted and stencilled such films as *Colour Box* (1935) and *Swinging the Lambeth Walk* (1939). The fluid nature of animation lent itself particularly well to experiment, shown also by the work of the German Lotte Reiniger (1899–1981), the American Mary Ellen Bute (1906–83) and the Scot Norman McLaren (1914–87).

After World War II the USA became an important centre of experimental film making. One of the catalysts was the presence of Fischinger, Lye, Richter and other European artists. The Russian film maker Maya Deren (1917–61) and the Czech film maker Alexander Hammid (1907–2004) created the poetic *Mesbes of the Afternoon* in California in 1943. Deren applied her interest in modern dance and magic to five other dream-like films. Her genre of 'psychodrama' or 'personal film' was central to this first phase of the

New American Cinema. Another powerful example was *Fireworks*, made in 1947 by Kenneth Anger (b 1930). Stan Brakhage (1933–2003) made psychodramas in the 1950s but then concentrated on exploring new forms of perception ‘unruled by man-made laws of perspective’, as demonstrated by *The Art of Vision* (1961–5). This approach has been described as ‘lyrical’ or ‘visionary’, although it is difficult to categorize a body of work that includes more than 200 films. Brakhage experimented with material aspects of the medium (*Motblight*, 1963) as well as new ways of seeing (*Text of Light*, 1974). In the late 1950s and early 1960s a strong ‘underground film’ movement developed in the USA, combining artistic experiment with cultural and political radicalism. Its connections with the Beat movement in literature were represented in *Pull my Daisy* (1959) by Robert Frank (b 1924) and Alfred Leslie (b 1927). *Flaming Creatures* (1962) by Jack Smith (1932–89) was one of many films that challenged sexual taboos. The underground had learnt a great deal from Dada and Surrealist films and from a few American precedents such as *Rose Hobart*, which Joseph Cornell (1903–72) started to work on in 1936, reducing a Hollywood feature film to a bizarre 13-minute short.

France had its own underground movement during the 1950s. *Un Chant d'amour*, made in 1950 by Jean Genet (1910–86), was an experiment in the representation of homosexuality as startling as Anger's *Fireworks*. The Lettrist movement challenged all aspects of established culture, provoking audiences with *The Film Has Already Started?* (1951), by Maurice Lemaître (b 1926) and *Howls in Favour of Sade* (1952) by Guy-Ernest Debord (1931–94). Lettrist work was introduced to the USA in 1962 by the Fluxus movement, which created its own ‘anti-films’ such as the imageless *Zen for Film* by Nam June Paik (1932–2006). In the 1960s Pop art and conceptual art formed close links with experimental film making. Andy Warhol (1928–87) created films of ‘real time’, in which a static camera was trained on a person (*Sleep*, 1963) or object (*Empire*, 1964). His production-line approach ignored the assumption that experimental films were personal in style and emotion. Emphasis shifted to the concept of the film and the activity of the viewer. Warhol was an important influence on the development of ‘structural film’, which became the leading tendency of the 1970s (see below). Other predecessors included two Austrians: Peter Kubelka (b 1934), who made films such as *Schwebater* (1958), in which a few images were put through complex variations; and Kurt Kren (1929–98), who shared Kubelka's interest in mathematical styles of editing, as in *Trees in Autumn* (1960).

Structural film, also known as ‘formal’ or ‘materialist’ film, was a broad range of work that questioned the physical nature of the medium and the arbitrariness of its codes of representation. American examples included *Film in which There Appear Edge Lettering, Dirt Particles, Sprocket Holes, etc.* (1965) by George Landow (b 1944) and *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969) by Ken Jacobs (b 1933). Jacobs began with a ten-minute film

from 1905, which he then fragmented and reworked for 90 minutes, revealing an astonishing wealth of detail before once again screening the original. Other American structural film makers included Ernie Gehr (b 1943), Hollis Frampton (1936–84) and Paul Sharits (1943–93). In Canada Joyce Wieland (1931–98) made *Sailboat* (1967), exploring subtle variations in the movement of boats across the screen. In the same year her husband Michael Snow (b 1929) completed *Wavelength*, a 45-minute camera zoom towards the far wall of a loft. This has remained the best known of all structural films, although Snow went on to such other extraordinary projects as *The Central Region* (1971), in which he programmed a camera to explore a landscape in ways that challenged normal perception. The structural-materialist film was developed in England by Malcolm Le Grice (b 1940) in films such as *Yes No Maybe Maybe Not* (1967) and *Little Dog for Roger* (1967–8), and by Peter Gidal (b 1946) in *Hall* (1968) and *Condition of Illusion* (1975). Other film makers included Annabel Nicholson (b 1946), who experimented with film loops and elements of live performance (e.g. *Precarious Vision*, 1973). Important work was also done in other countries, as illustrated by the multi-screen films (1971–3) and *Three Colour Separation Studies* (1976) by the Australian film makers Arthur Cantrill (b 1938) and Corinne Cantrill (b 1928).

Animation continued to be a strong area of experiment, with the American Robert Breer (b 1926) emerging as a major figure. His rapid juxtaposition of images and styles in *Recreation* (1956) and *Fist Fight* (1964) anticipated some of the concerns of structural films. In 1958 Len Lye summed up a lifetime of experiment in direct animation when he scratched the black-and-white patterns of *Free Radicals*, reducing the medium to its most basic and powerful elements. In the 1960s computers became an important area of research for animators such as the American brothers John Whitney (1917–95) and James Whitney (1921–82), who had been making abstract films since 1940. Their most important computer work included *Lapis* (1966) by James Whitney and *Permutations* (1967) by John Whitney.

Experimental film making has often been energized by political ideas. In the 1970s, for example, there was a strong development of feminist film theory that encouraged a radical approach to the language of film. A variety of new forms emerged, as shown by British work such as *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976) by Laura Mulvey (b 1941) and Peter Wollen (b 1938), *Light Reading* (1978) by Lis Rhodes (b 1942), *Thriller* (1979) by Sally Potter (b 1949), and *I Dish* (1982) by Jayne Parker (b 1957); or American work such as *Film about a Woman who ...* (1974) by Yvonne Rainer (b 1934) and *Double Strength* (1978) by Barbara Hammer (b 1939). In general the 1980s was a more eclectic period than the 1970s, with film makers freely combining lyricism with structural concerns. Influential examples include the films of the Peruvian film maker Rose Lowder (b 1941), such as *Sunflowers* (1982) and *Impromptu* (1989), or those of the French

film maker Yann Beauvais (*b* 1953), who explored visual deconstruction in *Untitled* (1984), verbal politics in *VO/ID* (1985) and complex diary form in *Divers épars* (1987). One tendency that continued to grow in strength was the interest in semiotics, shifting attention from material aspects of the medium to its use of signs. Many film makers returned to traditional genres and mainstream imagery to play subversively with them, in such films as *Mayhem* (1987) by the American film maker Abigail Child (*b* 1948) and *Cruises* (1989) by the French film maker Cécile Fontaine (*b* 1957).

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