We don't want false, polished, slick films—we prefer them rough, unpolished, but alive; we don't want rosy films—we want them the color of blood.

—STATEMENT OF THE NEW AMERICAN CINEMA GROUP

AVANT-GARDE

There are three broad classifications of film: fiction, documentary, and avant-garde movies. Avant-garde means literally in the front rank, in advance of the main body. (The main body in this case would refer to feature-length fiction films.) The avant-garde cinema has been called many names, not all of them polite. In the 1930s and 1940s, it was known as the “Experimental Film” or the “Poetic Cinema.” In the 1950s, these movies were part of the “Independent Cinema,” and in America especially, they were also called “Underground” movies. In the 1960s most avant-garde films in the United States were considered part of the “New American Cinema.” Since the 1970s, the term avant-garde has been applied to non-mainstream movies that are anti-establishment, subversive, or otherwise outrageous.

The Avant-Garde Aesthetic

By definition, avant-garde movies are produced by and for a minority. Because of their restricted appeal, they are seldom created within a commercial framework, where by necessity a film is considered at least in part a profitable commodity. Nor are avant-garde films generally considered a part of the entertainment industry as most fiction movies are. Experimental films can be exciting, witty, and provocative, but seldom are they relaxing or blandly entertaining. Many of these works are technically complex and difficult to understand, at least on first viewing. To many, they are an acquired taste. One needs to be sympathetic and tolerant in order to enter the rarified world of the avant-garde cinema.
There are almost as many kinds of avant-garde films as there are filmmakers. In general, however, these movies are made on small budgets because of their limited profit returning potential. Some of them run to six or eight hours in length, while others are merely a few seconds long. Most of them are under a half hour. These films are usually shot in 16 mm rather than the more expensive 35 mm, which is the standard gauge for fiction films. A few experimental filmmakers have even turned to Super 8 mm in order to cut expenses.

Many avant-garde filmmakers avoid courting public favor. Or rather, they will accept it only on their own terms. In many cases, these filmmakers reject the main body of film culture, dismissing it as glib, false, and aesthetically dead. They are particularly in revolt against the “Big Lie of Culture,” with its glib morality, its false cheer, and its refusal to explore the less “attractive” aspects of life. Many viewers are initially offended by the deliberate vulgarity and “bad taste” of avant-garde films. Shock techniques are common in these movies, for many of them are meant to jolt the audience out of its smugness. Viewers are commonly abused, ridiculed, and treated contemptuously—especially by those who cling to conventional middle-class values, which these filmmakers consider sterile and life-denying (10–2).

Most avant-garde films are formalistic. These directors use film as a means for exploring beyond the surface of the material world. They aren’t concerned with recording scenes from actual life, but with creating a totally imaginary universe, one that is anti-illusionist (10–3). They prefer to invent rather than discover, to present rather than represent.

Independent films are generally conceived and executed by a single individual. Unlike most fiction directors and many documentarists, experimental filmmakers usually shoot and edit their own footage. To keep costs
down, the collaborative aspect of the filmmaking process is kept to a minimum. Often the actors, if any, are the director's friends or family. But this necessary economy can also result in greater precision and more complete artistic control. Directors are ultimately answerable only to themselves. Hence, avant-garde filmmakers believe that their work is more personal than the average commercial movie because they make all the major artistic decisions.

Autobiographical elements are commonplace in these movies. Many avant-garde artists are primarily concerned with conveying their "inner impulses," their personal and subjective involvements with people, ideas, and experiences. For this reason, avant-garde movies are sometimes obscure and even incomprehensible. Many of these filmmakers have evolved their own personal language and symbolism. Unless the viewer is attuned to this essentially private world, these movies can seem indecipherable and out of control. However, in the best of these films— the symbolic and mythological works of Jean Cocteau, Jordan Belson, and James Broughton, for example—the necessary extra effort is rewarded.
Avant-garde filmmakers are often anti-illusionists—they attempt to break down the realism of an image by calling attention to its artificiality and its material properties. A movie image is printed on a strip of celluloid, which can be manipulated, even violated. In this sequence, a baby emerges from the mouth of another baby. Brakhage is playing with the idea of what's "behind" a film image. (Anthology Film Archives)
The avant-garde cinema has excelled in treating taboo subjects—those forbidden topics that are ruled out to commercial filmmakers because of the problems of censorship (10–4). Many of these movies were (and still are) considered shocking, immoral, and outrageous. Political and sexual themes abound, especially the latter, which have included overt homosexuality, lesbianism, voyeurism, fetishism, bestiality, masturbation, and sadomasochism, among others. Many avant-garde films have provoked outcries of public indignation. Some have been confiscated by the police. A few have even caused riots. In fact, avant-garde artists are often delighted by such spectacles of moral outrage.

With few exceptions, avant-garde films are unscripted. In part, this is because the filmmakers shoot and edit their own footage, and are therefore able to control their material at these stages of the filmmaking process. They also value chance and spontaneity in their movies, and in order to exploit these elements they avoid the inflexibility of a preordained script. Narrative structures are rare in these films. They seldom tell a story, but tend to explore an idea, emotion, or experience in a nonlinear fashion.

The roots of the avant-garde can be traced to Dadaism, an artistic movement that placed a high premium on the values of irrationality and anarchy. Many avant-garde filmmakers have justified the nihilistic and un-

10–4. *Un Chien Andalou* (France, 1929), directed by Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dalí. Avant-garde movies often deal with socially taboo themes and subjects that are ignored by the popular cinema because of the problems of censorship. Human sexuality has been one of the most enduring of these themes. (Raymond Rohauer)
controlled elements in their work as an artistic reflection of contemporary social conditions. In a world without order, stability, or coherence, what could be more appropriate, they would argue, than an art that stresses disorder, fragmentation, and incoherence?

Technically, the avant-garde cinema has gloried in the wide spectrum of expressionistic methods at its disposal. The images of these films are densely saturated with details. Like language in poetry, the visuals in many experimental films are highly condensed, elliptical, and often too complex to be absorbed at one sitting. Distorting lenses and filters are used with intoxicating abandon; double and multiple exposures are frequent; colors are employed nonnaturalistically; lighting effects can be startling and flamboyant; special effects are commonplace.

Avant-garde films are often cut in a furious, abrupt style. The lack of traditional story continuity in most of these movies offers maximum opportunity for juxtaposing every manner of shot, often with a minimum of logic. Sometimes the shots zip by at a breathless rate. Many experimental filmmakers delight in throwing together shots of incongruous objects. In the political satires of Bruce Conner, for example, the juxtapositions hurl

10-5. The Blood of a Poet (France, 1930), directed by Jean Cocteau.
The avant-garde films of Cocteau are among the most aesthetically, but he despised a soft, sentimental romanticism, and claimed to be a "realist." Of course his reality is not the reality found on the average street corner. Cocteau was concerned with internal realities—the world of the psyche and the soul. He described this, his first film, as "documentary scenes from another realm." (Audu-Brandon Films)
headlong at a frenzied pace, the shots colliding wittily in a junk heap of newstands, cartoon characters, nude figures, found objects, and prominent politicians.

Time and space in these films are generally subjective and psychological rather than literal. Cocteau's _Blood of a Poet_, for example, opens with a shot of a high tower collapsing. The fall is not completed until the end of the film, one hour later, when we see the tower hurling to the ground. Similarly, space in these movies is often magical and dreamlike. Objects seem to exist in a symbolic limbo of some kind. In Maya Deren's _Choreography for Camera_, for example, a dancer leaps gracefully from a wooded setting to a living room to an art museum in one fluid movement (10-16).

A few avant-garde filmmakers have even made movies without a camera. These films are composed "cinematically"—that is, instead of photographing images on the raw stock, the stock itself is used as a translucent medium upon which the artist paints, draws, scratches, or etches the subject matter by hand. These techniques are particularly popular with painters and sculptors who have turned to filmmaking. The Canadian Norman McLaren even created an artificial soundtrack by scratching directly on the sound portions of the film emulsion. Some artists have punched holes in the film strip, glued sand to it, even grown mold on it.

Film historians generally subdivide the avant-garde into four phases: (1) the Dadaist and Surrealist periods, roughly from 1920 to 1931, based primarily in Berlin and Paris; (2) the poetic and experimental period, roughly from 1940 to 1954, and centered mostly in the United States; (3) the Underground period, from 1954 to the late 1960s, and (4) the Structuralist cinema, which has dominated the avant-garde since then. Convenient as these subdivisions are, they can also be misleading. In many respects, the avant-garde cinema can be dated from the time of Méliès at the turn of the century. Although there have been periods of relatively little activity (most

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Whitney has been described as "a scientist of the soul." Influenced by Taoism and Zen Buddhism, his computer-animated films are at once mechanical, abstract, and mystical. In this movie, an Indian mandala design expands and congeals in infinite variation, creating an almost hypnotic effect on the viewer. (Anthology Film Archives)
notably during the Depression of the 1930s), the avant-garde has never ceased to produce important new works. Furthermore, while the most famous films tended to be produced in Paris, New York, and San Francisco, the avant-garde is essentially international. Important works were and still are being produced in London, Vienna, Toronto, Munich, Zagreb, and many other cities and towns.

Dadaism and Surrealism

The second and third decades of the twentieth century represented the most exciting period of avant-garde experimentation in the arts. The impulse to discover new modes of artistic expression was particularly fervent in Paris, which was generally regarded as the avant-garde capital of the world. In the plastic arts especially, the so-called Isms flourished. Perhaps the most significant of these was Cubism, which developed the idea of fragmentation, not only in painting and sculpture but in literature and cinema as well. After World War I, a new tone permeated the avant-garde—one reflecting a spirit of cynicism, disillusionment, and in some cases, nihilism.

10–7. Rhythmus 21 (Germany, 1921), directed by Hans Richter.
Along with a number of other German artists, Richter was a champion of the "absolute film," which consists solely of abstract shapes and designs. Insisting that movies should have nothing to do with acting, stories, or any kind of recognizable subject matter, Richter believed that film—like music and abstract painting—should be concerned with pure nonrepresentational forms. (Museum of Modern Art)
Dadaism developed from this social and artistic milieu. Painters, writers, and intellectuals formed this movement as a violent protest against "civilization," which they believed had been responsible for bringing about the Great War. Using humor, irrationalism, and outlandishness as their chief weapons, these iconoclasts wanted to tear down the scaffolding of traditional values. In their place, the Dadaists glorified individualism, licentiousness, and the spirit of anarchy. They were anti-intellectual, amoral, and anti-aesthetic. All social inhibitions—sexual, artistic, and personal—were dismissed with contempt. What the Dadaists valued most was an uncensored, childlike spontaneity.

The Dadaists believed that traditional culture—the "Fine Arts"—were bankrupt. Essentially Romantic revolutionaries, this cheery band of lunatics wanted to eparter la bourgeoisie with their gleeful assault on the bastions of middle-class culture. The new movement was steeped in a subversive aesthetic. A frontal attack was launched against "decency" and "good taste" in art. The Dadaists wanted to create a wholly new art, one that was free, vulgar, funny, and fun. Art, they felt, should be a revolution for the hell of it. Needless to say, a lot of people thought they were crazy (10–8).

10–8. King of Hearts (France, 1966), with Alan Bates, directed by Philippe de Broca. The Dadaists believed that madness was liberation, and de Broca's cult classic owes much to their anarchistic spirit. The inmates of a mental asylum take over an evacuated French village during World War I. They live out their fantasies, parading in their livery, and making love whenever the spirit moves them—while the sane people are off fighting the "War to End All Wars." The crazies convert a British soldier (Bates) to their philosophy of life, and when the sane citizens return to the village, he sheds his uniform and follows his friends to the asylum, where he presents himself for admission (photographed). (United Artists)
It's not hard to see why so many of them turned to movies as a mode of expression. Film, after all, was a new medium, with no aesthetic tradition behind it and no official body of "rules" to confine its development. The Dadaists especially delighted in the crazy chase sequences in the comedies of Mack Sennett, which they thought were perfect reflections of the absurdity of life. The cinema was also eclectic, and the Dadaists, with their scorn for traditional techniques and artistic "purity," were excited by the experimental possibilities of the medium. Anything that could be photographed could be tossed into a movie, where anything goes, nothing matters.

None of the Dadaists used narrative structures in their films, for they believed that plots are based on logic and coherence. Editing permits a filmmaker to present scenes that aren't "connected" in a sequential manner, in which there are no causes and effects. Hence, the director is able to create a world without "sense" or meaning. Indeed, the Dadaists rejected all organic conceptions of art. "There are no stories," Jean Epstein proudly proclaimed in 1921, "there are only situations without tail or head, without beginning, center, and end."

Despite the gloomy philosophical implications of Dadaism, the films themselves can be joyous, liberating, and even exhilarating. During the early 1920s, exhibitions of these movies were often more exciting than the films themselves. For example, in 1923, Man Ray, an American photographer working in Paris, was commissioned to produce a film for a Dadaist function. Ray concocted The Return to Reason, which was made by sprinkling objects (tacks, buttons, etc.) on film emulsion. He also included shots of a female nude humping and grinding in front of a window while sunlight and shadows made abstract patterns on her writhing torso. He hastily edited these shots together with some homemade glue. At the gathering itself, poets screamed their gibberish verses at the top of their voices, a concert of sirens and bells was performed, and Ray's film kept tearing off at the splices. The movie ultimately provoked a riot, and the members of the audience went berserk by ripping up the meeting hall. All in all, as film historian Arthur Knight observed, "it was considered a very successful Dadaist evening."

Perhaps the most famous Dadaist films are René Clair's Entr’acte and Fernand Léger's Ballet Mecanique, both produced in 1924. Clair's film, scripted by the Dadaist poet and theorist Francis Picabia, was partly inspired by the chase films of Mack Sennett. A funeral procession is shown in slow motion, emphasizing the pomp and solemnity of the occasion. Suddenly the hearse breaks away, and there follows a fast motion pursuit sequence with a group of dignified bourgeois gentlemen huffing and puffing after the runaway casket. Léger, one of the original Cubist painters, was more concerned with abstraction in film. Ballet Mecanique consists of a series of kinetic variations (10–9), although interspersed throughout the movie are twenty-three repetitions of the same shot of a washerwoman wearily climbing some stairs. The woman never does reach the top—which may or may not be symbolic.

In Berlin at about the same time, a number of artists were also experimenting with abstraction in film. Hans Richter, the best known of these, championed what he called the "absolute film," which has no real content but consists of pure forms. Along with his colleagues Viking Eggeling and Oskar Fischinger, Richter insisted that film's natural affinities were not with literature or drama, but with abstract art, music, and dance. Their films
contained nonrepresentational shapes, textures, and patterns, rhythmically choreographed into a kaleidoscope of shifting formal relationships.

Many of the original Dadaists were also prominent in the Surrealist movement, which developed in the mid-1920s and flowered at the turn of the decade. They brought with them some of the same perverse iconoclasm that characterized the earlier movement: a love of irrationality, a rejection of conventional "civilized" values, and a contempt for restraint and "good taste." Like Dadaism, Surrealism encompassed painters and writers as well as filmmakers. Perhaps the central figure of the new movement was André Breton, a psychologist and poet, who issued the first "Manifesto of Surrealism" (i.e., super-realism) in 1924.

But Surrealism differed from Dadaism, in tone as well as content and technique. Surrealism was more self-consciously "artistic," with a new emphasis on mystery, anxiety, and paranoia. The humor was also different.

10-9. *Ballet Mécanique* (France, 1924), directed by Fernand Léger. Best known for his cubist paintings, Léger was also a famous Dadaist filmmaker. One of the first to explore abstraction in the cinema, he created many striking kinetic effects by animating ordinary objects like crockery, dishes, and machine gears. (Museum of Modern Art)
Instead of the jolly rambunctiousness of Dadaism with its sense of fun and irresponsibility, the comedy of Surrealism tended toward the grotesque and the macabre. Much of the wit in these films would now be described as black comedy, with its emphasis on sick jokes and cruelty. The Spanish-born Buñuel, for example, was ghoulishly perverse in his comic sense.

Influenced by Marxism, the Surrealists tended to be more serious and systematic in their rebellion. They viewed bourgeois values as not only silly but dangerous and repressive as well. The anarchy of Dadaism was something displaced by a new leftist political orientation, resulting in a more explicit attack on capitalism and social institutions that they believed to be reactionary—particularly the Catholic Church. In the 1930s, this Marxist orientation became even more pronounced, especially in the works of Buñuel.

Perhaps the major influence on Surrealism was that of Freud, whose ideas were gaining wide currency in intellectual circles of the day. Freud’s theory of the unconscious, his preoccupation with dreams as a kind of subexistence with its own language, and his emphasis on sexual symbolism were to exert a profound effect on these filmmakers. By plumbing the wellsprings of the subconscious, they believed that they were revealing a truer reality, one that ultimately controls all conscious external behavior. Hence, the Surrealists preferred exploring pathological conditions rather than “normal” ones, dreams and nightmares rather than wakeful states. Many of these artists were obsessed with neurosis, hysteria, and madness.
Surrealists took a great interest in all spontaneous acts, whether it was primitive art, drunkenness, children's games, fantasies, or aberrant social behavior. They were particularly enthusiastic about automatism—any kind of uncontrolled artistic activity. The free association principle, which was the foundation of the literary technique of stream of consciousness, was incorporated in many Surrealist films. The cinema is the ideal medium for conveying the weird precision of dreams, the Surrealists believed, and most of them would agree with Dali that art is "concrete irrationality."

The Surrealists never forgot their Dadaist heritage, nor did they lose the capacity to stir up public indignation. L'Age d'Or, directed by Buñuel in 1930, created a riot when it was first exhibited. The film was subsequently banned, and most of the prints destroyed. The movie is a bizarre blending of Marx and Freud and is filled with scenes of savage political and religious satire, sadism, masochism, and casual cruelty.

One of the greatest of the Surrealist filmmakers was Jean Cocteau. He always maintained he was not a Surrealist, apparently because of personal
differences. (The Surrealists were often squabbling with each other.) A gifted man, Cocteau also distinguished himself as a painter, poet, critic, dramatist, and novelist. He didn’t neatly compartmentalize his various activities; all artists to Cocteau were “poets,” whether they wrote with words, sounds, or images. Never one to disparage one art in favor of another, Cocteau felt that each form of poetic expression had its specialty. The film poet, for example, simply wrote with the “ink of light.” He believed that the cinema was a first-rate vehicle for ideas, permitting the poet–director to take the viewer into realms that previously only sleep and dreams had led him to.

His Orpheus Trilogy, consisting of the features *Blood of a Poet* (1930), *Orpheus* (1950), and *Testament of Orpheus* (1960), is an exploration of the mysteries of poetic creation: what a poet is, how he creates, what he creates from, what his creations do to him (10–13).

In general, the Surrealists were less technique-oriented than the Dadaists. Surrealism is more realistic—although only in a relative sense. Less dependent on flashy photographic distortions, the Surrealists emphasized a sense of disorientation in their mise-en-scène. Objects are dislocated from their ordinary contexts and placed in arbitrary, surprising locations. In *Un Chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*), for example, Buñuel and Dali placed
Cocteau's last movie pulls out all the technical stops: It employs written language, drawings, still photographs, slow-motion sequences, double exposures, montage, reverse motion, and special effects galore. His personal friends (including Pablo Picasso) appear in a kind of testimonial. Cocteau addresses the camera, and other characters readily admit they're performing in a movie. Human statues with painted eyes on their eyelids seem both dead and alive. Graceful man horses glide through enchanted landscapes, which are populated with other exotic creatures such as this. See also Michael Gould, Surrealism and the Cinema (San Diego, Calif.: A. S. Barnes, 1976). (Films-Around-The-World)

10–14. The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (France, 1972), with Delphine Seyrig, Stéphane Audran, Fernando Rey, Paul Frankeur, Bulle Ogier, and Jean-Pierre Cassel; directed by Luis Buñuel.
In a career of extraordinary endurance, Buñuel continued to make iconoclastic movies well into his old age. His contempt for middle-class values became more bemused, almost affectionate. In this film he presents us with a series of loosely connected episodes dealing with the innate rituals and hypocrisies of a group of well-dressed semizombies. Interspersing these episodes are shots of the main characters walking on an empty road (picted). No one questions why they are there. No one seems to know where they are going. Buñuel doesn't say. (Twentieth Century-Fox)
dead donkeys on top of pianos. Nothing is explained or justified, and viewers are left on their own to try and find “reasons” for the weird tableaux and events. The Surrealists delighted in this strangeness for its own sake, and they often sneered at critical explications of their work. “Nothing in this film symbolizes anything,” Buñuel and Dalí perversely explained of their film—which of course doesn’t contain any dog. “Andalusian” or otherwise.

The Poetic Cinema

The second phase of the avant-garde movement was essentially a period of consolidation and modest expansion. A number of excellent films were produced during this period, but for the most part, they tended to develop the themes and techniques originally explored by the Dadaists and Surrealists. During the 1930s, relatively few experimental movies were produced. Many of the filmmakers of the previous decade turned to making documentaries, which seemed a more appropriate artistic vehicle during the Depression. As the Nazis gradually seized power during this period, many of the German experimentalists began to emigrate to other countries. By the conclusion of World War II, some of the most talented European avant-garde filmmakers had moved to the United States, which partly explains the emergence of New York and San Francisco as the new avant-garde capitals of the cinema.

The influence of Freud remained strong, most notably in the films of Willard Maas, Sidney Peterson, and Maya Deren (10–15). Some of the psychological theories of Carl Jung were also gaining prominence, especially his emphasis on myth and ritual. Freudian and Jungian ideas were used to suggest possible motivations rather than to offer neat solutions. Explorations of the psyche were not sensationalized, although sexual frustration still figured prominently. Unresolved anxieties, the search for identity, and the need to escape were popular themes, particularly in the works of Maya Deren, who was perhaps the most influential and widely known experimental filmmaker of the period.

Deren’s Mists of the Afternoon was Surrealist in its influence and features the director herself as the neurotic, terrified protagonist. There is a nightmare quality to the film, a sense of terror as the young woman becomes progressively more disoriented by a series of apparently trivial incidents. In her later works, Deren explored the possibilities of dance and cinema, combining the two mediums in such works as A Study in Choreography for the Camera (10–16).

Deren was also an important theorist of the avant-garde cinema. She wrote and spoke frequently of the advantages of the personal film over the largely standardized products being produced in Hollywood. She differentiated the poetic cinema from commercial films primarily in terms of structure. Like a lyric poem, personal films are “vertical” investigations of a theme or situation. That is, the filmmaker is not concerned so much with what’s happening as with what a situation feels like or what it means. The director is concerned with probing the depths and layers of meaning of a given moment.

Fiction movies, on the other hand, are like novels and plays—they’re essentially “horizontal” in their development. Narrative filmmakers employ
linear structures that must progress from situation to situation, from feeling to feeling. The fiction director doesn’t have much time to explore the implications of a given idea or emotion, for he or she must keep the film “moving along.” The poetic filmmaker ignores or destroys time and space, whereas the narrative director must be more careful in observing their requirements, usurping a lot of screen time.

Deren believed that in certain cases it’s possible—though very difficult—to combine these two types of structures. In the greatest plays of Shakespeare, for example, the story moves along on a horizontal plane of development. But occasionally, this forward action stops, thus permitting the dramatist to explore a given feeling within a kind of timeless void. The Shakespearean soliloquy is essentially a vertical exploration of an idea or emotion—somewhat like an aria in an opera which temporarily suspends time, space, and movement. Deren believed that in film such “arias” or set pieces are sometimes found in works that employ loose horizontal structures—the famous Odessa Steps sequence from Eisenstein’s *Potemkin*, for example.

Deren was also one of the key figures in publicizing the avant-garde cinema and in expanding its audiences. She spoke to many groups across the country, urging them to form their own film societies in which personal films could be exhibited to new audiences. She booked her own works at a number of universities and art museums, and helped them form private groups where poetic films could be shown on a regular basis. Perhaps the most famous film society of this period, Cinema 16, was organized in 1947 by Amos Vogel in New York City. Throughout the 1950s, this group exhibited virtually all the important avant-garde movies produced in America. Two other famous film societies were those under the auspices of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and of the San Francisco Museum of Art.
Toward the end of this phase of the avant-garde movement, a number of filmmakers were already beginning to explore themes and techniques that are more characteristic of the later Underground period. Sexual subjects began to be treated more directly, less symbolically. A new uninhibited coarseness could be discerned in such films as Brakhage's *Flesh of Morning*, which deals explicitly with masturbation. Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* is a masochistic fantasy of a male homosexual, considerably less genteel than the majority of poetic films of this period (10–18).

In fact, a number of critics expressed alarm at this element of "perversity," which was fast becoming a dominant mode in the avant-garde. Jonas Mekas, who was to become a staunch defender of such films less than a decade later, complained of a "homosexual conspiracy" in the experimental cinema. Amos Vogel was dismayed by the obsession with crude sexuality for its own sake, which he felt characterized many of the works of the younger filmmakers. "The saleability of sex in a sexually repressed society is inevitable," Vogel observed, and he thought most of these new films were exploiting the sexual hangups of American society. They functioned merely as an

10–16. A *Study in Choreography for the Camera* (U.S.A., 1945), directed by Maya Deren. Deren's two loves were dance and film, and in this movie she attempted to fuse them. She subtitled her work "Pas de Deux"—i.e., a kinetic rhapsody between camera and dancer. (Museum of Modern Art)
artistically pretentious kind of pornography. But the avant-garde was entering a new phase in the 1950s, one which represented a return in many respects to the Dadaist heritage of anarchy, iconoclasm, and total freedom of expression. The avant-garde had grown somewhat prim since the 1930s, and the crazies were back—determined to rape the movement of its respectability.

The Underground Phase

The Underground film represents the most prolific, stylistically varied, and controversial phase of the avant-garde movement. Beginning in the mid-1950s, hundreds of young filmmakers sprang up across the United States, although the main concentrations were still in San Francisco and New York City. Despite harsh criticisms and scorn from the film establishment, these determined nonconformists continued to make movies—some of them shrill, others outrageously comic and irreverent, a few of them profound, a great many of them inept and incomprehensible.
The turning point between the poetic cinema and the Underground phase is not easy to determine, since many of the same filmmakers were active in both periods. A number of historians and critics have pointed to Brakhage's *Desisfilm* as the watershed work. Made in 1954, the movie reflected a new morality based on spontaneity, a preoccupation with youth, and an emphasis on purely sensuous elements. Technically, *Desisfilm* established the main lines of what was to develop into a new aesthetic in the avant-garde cinema, one emphasizing "roughness" and a deliberate crudity of technique. Brakhage used a hand-held camera that bobbed, weaved, and swirled unsteadily in virtually every shot. The editing style is frantic and rapid fire, with abrupt close-ups suddenly thrust upon the audience. The framing seems clumsy and unprofessional, and some of the images are out of focus.

It was this technical crudity that aroused most of the antagonism of the critics at the time. These young filmmakers were harshly condemned for their lack of polish and their unwillingness to discipline themselves, to learn the rules of their craft. In fact, a great many of these movies were (and still are) incompetent, self-indulgent, and boring. The lighting too often has a home-movie look, the cutting can be arbitrary and clumsy, the images out of focus, and the sound perfectly awful.

But in some cases, this crudity is intentional. Many of these filmmakers disdained the "costly look," which they associated with the empty gloss of

By the late 1940s, the avant-garde cinema was moving into a new phase, characterized by a return to some of the shock techniques of the Dada and Surrealist periods. *Fireworks*, which is filled with images of violence and male sadomasochism, deals with the sadomasochistic fantasies of a homosexual, played by Anger himself. See also Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1971).
Period classifications within the avant-garde are vague at best, for many filmmakers have worked in a variety of idioms throughout several periods. Smith described his long career in the following manner: “My cinematic excreta is of four varieties: batiked abstractions made directly on film between 1939 and 1946; optically printed nonobjective studies composed around 1950; semi-realistic, animated collages made as part of my alchemical labors of 1957 to 1962; and chronologically superimposed photographs of actualities formed since the latter year. They are valuable works, works that will live forever—they made me gray.” (Anthology Film Archives)

most commercial movies—movies they considered “beautiful but dead.” The technical crudity of these films is at least in part a kind of anti-establishment gesture of contempt, then, a badge of sincerity and independence. Furthermore, like the cinema verite documentarists, these artists believed that a truly spontaneous movie will inevitably be crude in places, but the honesty and directness of the shots must take precedence over technical polish.

A number of these artists were competent and even gifted technicians. Marie Menken, for example, was a special-effects technician for several Signal Corps films. Brakhage had done a good deal of conventional filmmaking for various commercial organizations; and Ed Emshwiller directed films for the conservative United States Information Agency. Emshwiller, generally acknowledged as the most gifted technician of the Underground movement, is a self-conscious and precise craftsman (10–20).

In the 1960s, the Underground movement flourished, and in many respects, surfaced. No longer isolated and alienated from the main cultural
stream, these filmmakers now became a part of the new liberated and youth-oriented lifestyle that burgeoned during this decade. The era of sexual permissiveness, political activism, rock and pop culture, and the drug scene coincided perfectly with the themes of the Underground cinema. Most importantly, perhaps, it was a time for youth—for childlike spontaneity and even outright infantilism. "If I were you," Robert Downey wrote of his film *Chafed Elbows*, "I wouldn't let anybody over forty years old in the theatre unless they're accompanied by a teenager."

The 1960s was a decade of "doing your own thing." All of the arts assumed a new sense of improvisation, fluidity, and lack of rigor. Traditional "rules" and conventions were viewed with suspicion and even paranoia in some instances. The role of chance and the accidental became progressively more dominant in the arts. In the cinema, these aleatory elements could be found not only in commercial movies but also in cinéma vérité documentaries and especially in Underground films.

The 1960s was also a decade of political unrest and civil protest, and a number of Underground films reflected these anxieties, often in a satirical mode. Robert Nelson's *Oh Dem Watermelons* is a witty spoof on clichés about Negroes. Watermelons serve as a symbol of black people, and to the accompaniment of corny minstrel show songs, we see these melons kicked, crushed, splattered, and even seduced! Perhaps the most effective political satirist of this period was Stan Vanderbeek, whose "assemblages" are steeped in black humor and whimsical irreverence. Movies like *Skullduggers Part I* and *Part II* feature illustrations from magazines, film clips of politicians, and all kinds of incongruous photographs that emphasize the madness of American life (10–21).

Sex was probably the most popular theme of the Underground cinema. With the relaxation of censorship during the 1960s, many commercial film

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10–20. *Thanatopsis* (U.S.A., 1960–1962), directed by Ed Emshwiller. Rejecting the "costly look" of most conventional fiction movies, many Underground filmmakers wanted their works to look crude and unpolished. Some of these artists, however, didn't share this contempt for craftsmanship. While Emshwiller's movies can be wildly unconventional in other respects, most of them are photographed and edited with great skill. (Museum of Modern Art)
directors also began to explore the complexities of human sexuality, and the avant-garde was thereby co-opted of one of its traditional prerogatives. The Underground responded by concentrating on sexual aberrations—at least those areas of sexuality that were considered abnormal by the middle-class majority. Homosexuality and orgiastic sex were particularly popular subjects.

One of the classic examples of this type of film is Jack Smith’s paean to pansexuality, Flaming Creatures, which was banned in New York State. The movie features virtually every kind of sexuality: sadomasochism, transvestism, a gang-rape of a hermaphrodite, masturbation, oral sex, and even vampirism. Twisted arms and legs writhe like serpents in a steaming pit. The top of the frame decapitates many of the pulsating swirling figures. Much of the time we’re unable to distinguish the sex of the people, until their full bodies stream into the frame and their genitals are visible. There is a ritualistic quality to these frenzied activities, a kind of Black Mass in which the celebrants abandon themselves totally to the doomed ecstasy of violent sexual release. The soundtrack screeches and hisses with animal noises, mock-romantic Latin American music, rock’n’roll, and a cacophony of tasteless jingles.

Ritual and myth have always played a prominent role in the avant-garde cinema, and in the early and mid-1960s these preoccupations became even more conspicuous in such films as Brakhage’s Dog Star Man, Bruce Baillie’s Man, and the works of Gregory Markopoulos, who derived most of his subjects from classical Greek myths. Markopoulos’s themes often revolve

Among the most gifted political and social satirists of the Underground cinema, Vanderbeek exploits the Dadaist technique of incongruity with hilarious results. His witty "assemblages" machine-gun try at a dreamless clip, juxtaposing pictures of public figures with vulgar pop images. (Museum of Modern Art)
Scorpio Rising (U.S.A., 1963), directed by Kenneth Anger.
This film is a mock-heroic celebration of phallic narcissism. It centers on a motorcycle gang, its essentially homosexual rituals, and its preoccupation with "masculine" emblems—leather, chains, and chrome phallic fixtures. Visually, Scorpio Rising has a deliberate horror-movie roughness and is accompanied by a soundtrack of machismo-strewn rock 'n' roll songs of the period. (Museum of Modern Art)

around homosexual love—masculine in the case of The Iliad Passion, feminine in Psyche.

One of the finest filmmakers to be influenced by the idea of myth is Jordan Belson, whose works are only formally in the abstract tradition of the avant-garde. Belson's movies are mystical, inspired in large part by the philosophical literature of Zen Buddhism. His works have also been influenced by drug experiences, particularly mescaline and peyote, with their hallucinatory powers of expanding consciousness and their ability to induce trance-like mystical states. Re-Entry is generally regarded as Belson's best work. Originally inspired by John Glenn's historic penetration into space, the film is densely symbolic and mythical; although it can also be accepted as a purely abstract movie. Buddhist ideas of mystical reincarnation are likened to a spacecraft's re-entry into the earth's atmosphere. Belson used some of Jung's psychological theories to structure his film. The three stages of space travel—launching, penetration of deep space, and re-entry—symbolize three mystical states: death, a limbolike suspension in the cosmic void, and rebirth.

Andy Warhol was the enfant terrible of the Underground movement. Critics either hailed him as an audacious innovator or vilified him as an
outrageous fraud. Warhol's disdain for "professional" standards infuriated even other members of the avant-garde. His self-admitted indolence, his deadpan manner of saying outlandish things about—gasp!—Art, and his shrewd publicity sense alienated a good many devotees of the Underground cinema. There's a strong element of the put-on in Warhol's movies, and humorless critics—including many of his champions—often failed to discern it. Warhol himself didn't take his films very seriously. When asked why he turned to cinema after a successful career as a graphic artist, he laconically replied that movies were easier.

Warhol produced a number of films in the 1960s that were given the rather solemn appellation of the "New Realism." In fact, these movies out-Lumiereed Lumiere, consisting of lengthy minimal-take recordings of perfectly unspectacular events. Eat is a single-take 45-minute film of a man eating a mushroom. Sleep consists of six hours worth of footage showing a man sleeping. Actually the movie is composed of only three hours of footage, but each reel is repeated. The camera never moves, and the editing is confined to reel changes only. Perhaps the most spectacular example of War-


Many avant-garde filmmakers are drawn to mythological materials, or like Broughton, they create their own mythos with a private symbology. Broughton described Dreamwood in the following terms: "Somewhere (at the center of the world) there is an island called Animandra, or the Kingdom of Her. And somewhere in the wilds of Animandra there is a magic wood known as Brocelian, the Penioux Forest. Within this labyrinthine grove the dreamwood mysteries take place, the tests, the encounters, the rites of the Goddess in her many forms. Only a hero dares risk his life by entering this realm of the feminine powers. And ritual hieratic is the poet, perhaps, guided as he is (and taunted) by that blessed demozel, his muse, whose name is Alchemina. Ordinary men remain safely outside in the dry meadows of their masculine games. But to the man who conquers his fear, persists in his quest and wins her favor, the Goddess of Dreamwood will reveal her greatest secret." (American Federation of the Arts)
10–24. Frank Film (U.S.A., 1973), directed by Frank Mouris.
Avant-garde movies are often autobiographical and self-reflexive—they call attention to themselves; their aesthetic workings, and their creators. Mouris’s film consists of magazine cutouts that he animated to illustrate the main influences of his youth. The soundtrack features two voices (both Mouris’s), one listing a series of words beginning with the letter F, the other warily recounting his life story to date. (Pyramid Films)

hol’s movies that don’t move is Empire, in which the techniques are so minimal that the film is virtually a still photograph extended in time. Warhol set up his camera and photographed the Empire State Building in a single shot that lasts eight hours. Actual time is preserved more-or-less intact. The major event of the movie takes place when day transforms to night.

Stan Brakhage is perhaps the quintessential Underground filmmaker. A mystical visionary, he views the artist as a kind of bard or seer. His movies are intensely personal like the works of the Romantic English poet William Blake. Brakhage’s films are often obscure and egocentric, saturated with private symbolism. Like most Romantics, Brakhage exploits himself as a universal symbol:

I had the concept of everything radiating out of me, and that the more personal or egocentric I would become, the deeper I would reach and the more I could touch those universal concerns that would involve all men.

Dog Star Man is generally regarded as Brakhage’s finest work. His technical range in this movie is very broad. The cutting is rhythmically sensuous, and there are expressionistic distortions in profusion. Multiple exposures, negative images, and many different lenses and filters are used to convey emotional suggestions.

Structuralist Cinema

Structuralist cinema is indebted to its predecessors—a fusion of various influences. It’s also loosely related to the critical theory of structuralism, discussed in Chapter 11. For the most part, the movement is anti-illusionist.
The subject matter of the image is either abstract or unimportant. "Film is not a vehicle for ideas or portrayals of emotion," said Ernie Gehr, a prominent structuralist. "Film is a variable intensity of light, an interval balance of time, a movement within a given space." In Gehr's films, the function of the image is to act as a formal unit of a predetermined design. The image is essentially a segment of an aesthetic system.

Structuralists also emphasize film as concrete material, rather than a medium for conveying human enactments. For this reason, this type of movie is sometimes referred to as a structural/materialist film. Many of these artists prefer a concrete subject—an empty room, a corridor, a landscape—but it's used dialectically, set in opposition to some conceptual premise. The flicker effect, created by single-frame shots, as in the works of Tony Conrad and Paul Sharits (10–25), is one such conceptual technique. Looping is another. What this involves is taking a short piece of film and joining it end to end so it can be repeated at variable intervals, at different speeds, and so on.

"Structuralism is a cinema of the mind rather than the eye," observed critic P. Adams Sitney. Influenced by the movements called Minimalism and Conceptualism in the plastic arts, structuralist filmmakers emphasize the shape of their movies as the principal raison d'etre. They are also influenced by systems and game theories. The subject matter—if any—is deflected by a predetermined and often mechanized concept. A film can be structured in

One of the crown princes of the avant-garde, Broughton takes upish delight in lampooning human absurdities. In this shot, he zaps the prim correctness of his two ladies by presenting them in the buff. Ironically, their sagging, vulnerable flesh is the main source of their humanity. (Anthology Film Archives)

In the structuralist cinema, the codes of cognition are totally self-defined. They are structured according to the principles of recurrence, dialectical polarities, time and space increments, and so on. The process of deciphering these cognitive codes and their interrelationships is analogous to the film's working itself out, fulfilling its structural destiny. In Sharits's flicker film, two images (requiring separate screens and projectors) are simultaneously juxtaposed. Each filmstrip consists of irregularly recurring images—two or three frames in duration, interspersed by blank or color frames—or purely abstract designs, like colored stripes or circular shapes. The rapid flickering of images creates a mesmerizing stroboscopic effect, testing the audience's psychological and physiological tolerance. The content of the film is its structural form rather than the subject matter of the images as images. (Anthology Film Archives)

terms of image content (concrete or abstract), duration (time and interval as structuring principles), formal juxtapositions in the editing, and so on.

Michael Snow's Wavelength is one of the most written-about works of the Structuralist cinema (10–27). The film is a 45-minute forward-zoom shot, taken from the farther end of an 80-foot loft, inching almost imperceptibly toward a set of windows and the street behind them, halting occasionally when interrupted by four human events (including a death), and ending finally on a close-up of a photo pinned to the wall: waves. The film's content is multiple. It's the diminishing area of the visual field, the kinetic increments of the forward zoom, the alteration from day to night within the shot's duration, and the accompanying soundtrack, consisting of an electronic sine wave, which starts at a low intensity of 50 cycles per second and ends on a high of 1200 cps.

This film has been interpreted as a metaphor of inexorability. The agonizingly slow forward zoom across a lengthy room almost imperceptibly reduces and redefines the visual field. The movement has an ultimate destination, but throughout most of the film, we cannot guess what it will be; we can only wait until all other options have been eliminated. The kinetic motion is symbolic. We proceed from uncertainty to certainty, from freedom (or the illusion of freedom) to destiny. See also Peter Gidal, ed., *Structural Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1976). (Anthology Film Archives)


Avant-garde films are often allied with rebellious cultural movements. From the 1920s to the 1940s, the main influences were those of Dadaism, Freud, and Marx. In the 1950s, the Beat Generation provided an outlet for alienated artists, much as the hippie movement gave vent to rebellious artists of the 1960s and 1970s. *Repo Man* derives its energy from the punk-rock subculture, though the movie also satirizes its hypocrisy. (Universal City Studios)
The film also has a metaphysical content. The camera’s movement has been interpreted as a symbolic model of cognition, of the limits of perception, and the limits of human endeavor. "Most of my films accept the traditional theater situation," Snow pointed out, "audience here, screen there." There is a dialectical tension between the human materials in the film—especially the death—and the camera’s implacable forward motion. To paraphrase Snow: The zoom emphasizes the cosmic continuity, which is beautiful, but tragic; it just goes on without us. On this level, the movie is a symbolic analogue, a metaphor of man’s impotence in the face of an inexorable Fate.

In his book Expanded Cinema, Gene Youngblood explores some of the directions the avant-garde is already embarked upon and will inevitably expand. These developments include videotronics, multiple projection environments, and screenless holographic cinema in three dimensions, to mention only a few. The spectacular developments that await us in the future are likely to make previous avant-garde movements look charmingly antiquated by comparison.

FURTHER READING


