

## THE AVANT-GARDE

by David Bordwell

If Louis B. Mayer, the Hollywood mogul, had lived until the late 1960s, he would have been startled by some of the changes in the tastes of movie-going Americans.

True, the lines would have been longest at theaters offering such easily recognizable Hollywood fare as *Dr. Dolittle* or *Paint Your Wagon*. But in the larger cities and college towns, a good many movie fans would have been elsewhere. Some would have been thronging local "art" theaters to see Ingmar Bergman's *The Hour of the Wolf* or Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana*. Others would have been at the museum watching experimental works by Stan Brakhage or Andy Warhol. And the local campus film society might have been packing them in with Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*, a savage denunciation of bourgeois lifestyles.

Most Americans were (and are) still going to the movies to be entertained. But the emergence after World War II of a big new generation of college graduates—some of them with film appreciation courses under their belts, many with some exposure to modernism in the arts—created a sizable audience in the United States for experimental films.

Such films were nothing new. Almost as soon as it was born, cinema encountered modernism. The meeting occurred not in the Hollywood studios but, during the 1920s, in the cafés of Paris and Berlin and the chilly meeting rooms of Moscow. Painters were attracted to cinema by its capacity to become what one artist called "drawings brought to life." Composers found its dynamic movement and montage a counterpart of musical rhythm. For artists in many fields, the new medium represented modernity itself. "Most forms of representation have had their day," declared Antonin Artaud, the French poet and founder of the "theater of cruelty," in 1930. "Life, what we call life, becomes ever more inseparable from the mind. The cinema is capable of interpreting this domain more than any other art, because idiotic order and customary clarity are its enemies."

It was thus not simply the technical side of cinema that appealed to modernist artists. Cinema was an ideal vehicle for the modernist urge to question the solidity of reality, to probe the way the world seems to the beholder.

Among the first film-makers to take this approach was Germany's Robert Wiene, in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). With

In a scene from Robert Wiene's hallucinatory *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Caligari's hypnotized servant, Cesare, looms over one of his victims. Many film critics argue that Cesare represented the "enslaved" German working class.



remarkable sets painted in the expressionist style, the film conveyed the hallucinatory vision of a madman named Francis. Only in the end is it revealed that Dr. Caligari is the warden of the insane asylum where Francis is an inmate. Yet the audience is led to wonder whether there is some larger metaphorical truth about society in the hallucinations of the madman. This theme is well-worn today, but it was novel in its time. Not until after World War II did the probing of psychic ambiguity become a common theme for movie-makers.

And there were other ambiguities. A samurai has been killed and his wife raped; a bandit has confessed. So much is fact. Yet, through flashbacks, the wife, the bandit, and a witness each present a different version of events. Was the rape resisted? Did the samurai fight bravely, or did he try to flee? That is the substance of Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon* (1951), which inaugurated the illusion-reality theme in post-World War II cinema. Although considered "too Western" in Japan, the film had an enormous impact in the West—not least for its refusal to answer the riddles it posed. The audience never learns the truth; Kurosawa suggests that each version *is* the truth, at least to each character.

The inquiry into the relativity of perception preoccupied a whole generation of European film-makers during the 1950s and '60s. In *Wild Strawberries* (1957), Sweden's Ingmar Bergman used flashbacks to detail an old man's nostalgic revision of his past. Later, in

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*Persona* (1966), Bergman merged almost seamlessly the chaotic dreams of a nurse on the edge of a nervous breakdown with his portrayal of her reality. Bergman suggests that film-making itself is as mysterious and impenetrable as the lives he portrays: "The illuminated face, the hand raised as if for an incantation, the old ladies at the square, the few banal words, all of these images come and attach themselves like silvery fish to my net; or, more precisely, I myself am trapped in a net, the texture of which I am not aware."

### Empty Spaces

Federico Fellini's lively *8½* (1963) advanced the theme further with its hero, a harried movie director whose memories and fantasies are filtered through film conventions and clichés. Fellini thus introduced a reflection upon cinema itself, the machine for producing realistic-seeming illusions. Just as Pablo Picasso's work questioned realistic conceptions of painting, so such films as *Rashomon* and *8½* challenged the "customary clarities" of the Hollywood film. As Alain Resnais, co-director of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), put it, "My aim is to put the spectator in such a state that a week, six months, or a year afterwards, placed before a problem, he would be prevented from cheating and be obliged to react freely."

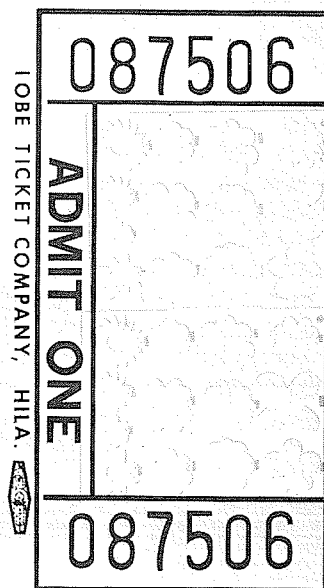
But Resnais and his colleagues clung to the belief that a film should tell a story. Other modernists, not only in film, were going a step further, de-emphasizing story-telling, or even eliminating it altogether. They aimed to draw the audience's attention to the medium itself, to the tangible patterns of words, gestures, scenes. The idea originated in modern painting. Some painters, such as the Soviet constructivist Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), held that doing away with "stories" would return the spectator to a state of innocent perception, allowing him to see the elements of art clearly. Artists of a more mystical turn believed that the purist approach could provide a glimpse of the ineffable—what Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), inventor of the school of abstract geometric painting known as suprematism, called "the semaphore of light across an infinite abyss."

Malevich's ideas were echoed after World War II in the work of young directors influenced by abstract expressionist painting. In the films of Missouri-born Stan Brakhage, perhaps the most important American avant-gardist of his generation, the "story" is no more than

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Andy Warhol's poster for the 1967 New York Film Festival. Avant-garde film-makers exhibit their works at dozens of major festivals held around the world every year in hopes of winning critical acclaim—or gaining the attention of a commercial distributor.



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an episode from his personal life or a sketchy mythic formula, transformed into a purely cinematic vision of flickering hues, flowing shapes, and endlessly changing views of mundane objects. In *Scenes from under Childhood* (1967), Brakhage produced the most poetic of home movies. He interspersed photos from a family album with images of domestic activity, as well as with superimpositions, reflections, and other distortions, to suggest the lyrical deformations of memory. In *The Text of Light* (1974), he put an ordinary ashtray close to his camera lens to create a startling play of color and shape.

The classic example of the "purist" avant-garde is probably Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967). *Wavelength* tells a "story," but it is completely fragmented. The scene is a New York loft: People come and go, play a radio, answer a phone call. Perhaps a murder is committed. But the film is organized around a camera technique. The camera is in a fixed position. Snow's zoom lens begins with a long shot inside the loft and jerkily enlarges the room little by little until the distant wall fills the frame to reveal a photograph of ocean waves. The film's 45-minute duration is thus revealed as a "wavelength."

As the frame enlarges, the audience is invited to play a perceptual guessing game. How will the shot's composition change? Will the

fragments of story ever coalesce? Snow's explanation of *Wavelength* shows that his intentions were purely abstract: "The image of the yellow chair has as much 'value' in its own world as the girl closing the window. The film events are . . . chosen from a kind of scale of mobility that runs from pure light events, the various perceptions of the room, to the images of moving human beings."

To which playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), another father figure of modernism, would have replied that art is about society, not just light and figures. The political and rhetorical uses of film technique had been pioneered during the 1920s by a group of young Soviet film-makers, notably Sergey Eisenstein in *Strike* (1925) and *Potemkin* (1925). Four decades later, it was to Brecht and the Soviets that young leftist film-makers turned to merge experimentation with social criticism.

### Beginning at the End

From the Soviets they adopted the notion that film should not passively copy reality but challenge it through disjunctive editing, explicit commentary, and by allowing audiences to see that scenes have been staged. From Brecht came the "estrangement effect," the notion that by calling attention to the mechanics of presentation instead of concealing them Hollywood-style, actors and directors could make audiences think critically about what they were seeing.

This trend shows clearly in the work of the West German film-making team of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. In *Not Reconciled* (1965), they depicted a fascist specter haunting Germany by interrupting scenes from the daily life of a contemporary family with an elliptical series of flashbacks to Germany during the two world wars. The characters are barely identified; the chronology of events is unclear. The camera dwells ominously on empty spaces, as if waiting for the hidden meaning of history to emerge. *History Lessons* (1972), adapted from a Brecht novel, uses anachronism to make viewers think about the links between economic and political power. Set amid the ruins of imperial Rome, it is a portrait of Julius Caesar, busily juggling state business with the pursuit of private profit, drawn largely through fake TV interviews with his toga-clad colleagues.

From Soho to Paris, today's film-makers are still experimenting with these three modernist "traditions": the illusion-reality theme, the purely cinematic statement, and the political critique built on innovative film techniques. Raul Ruiz traces the convolutions of memory and misunderstanding in such elusive films as *Three Crowns of the Sailor* (1983). The American film-maker Jim Jarmusch, in *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), dramatizes his portrait of three wandering down-and-outers with a rigorous, almost mathematical use of framing and editing. Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's *Our Hitler: A Film*

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*from Germany* (1977) uses Brechtian techniques to trace the links between Germany's Wagnerian romanticism and the rise of Hitler.

In recent years, many avant-garde film-makers have trimmed their sails a bit. During the late 1970s, younger directors like Wim Wenders and Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1946-82), raised on a steady diet of Hollywood classics, created a more popular "art cinema." With his recent parodies of the early *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* movies, Andy Warhol has moved into straightforward feature filmmaking, and several experimentalists have followed. Even Bruce Conner, master of the surreal compilation film, now makes commercial music videos for Devo and other rock groups. And many directors with a political message have set off in search of larger audiences, a trend best seen in such films as the popular *Night of the Shooting Stars* (1982), about Italy's internal wrestling with fascism during World War II, by the brothers Vittorio and Paolo Taviani.

The relationship between avant-garde and popular cinema is, as always, complex. The Hollywood classics of the 1930s and '40s, for example, inspired the experiments of the French New Wave directors of the 1950s, which influenced the young directors who began arriving in Hollywood during the late 1960s. The makers of popular horror and science fiction movies, always in search of new cinematic shocks, are quick to exploit new avant-garde techniques.

At the moment, the avant-garde is in a bit of a lull. But there remains a large and growing audience, ready to welcome all manner of films that would have been unthinkable during the heyday of the Hollywood studio system. The experimentalists are sure to thrive.

The work of Jean-Luc Godard perfectly exemplifies the fluctuations and adjustments within the alternative cinema. From New Wave cinephilia during the early 1960s, he shifted to strident and forbidding Marxist works later in the decade, and then to serene, voluptuous studies like *Passion* (1982). Last year, he released *Hail Mary*, a mystical retelling of the Virgin Birth in contemporary times. It is anything but conventional.

To many film connoisseurs, Godard is the symbol of cinematic modernism's vitality. The twisting path of his career suggests that there is always a new avenue for experimentation, that many possibilities remain open to avant-garde film-makers imaginative enough to seek them out. An exasperated inquisitor once demanded of Godard: "But surely you will admit that a film must have a beginning, a middle, and an end?"

"Certainly," he replied. "But not necessarily in that order."