

The Cinema of Difference

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In speaking of experimental cinema one refers to a genre that is not a genre. The term attempts to draw together films of opposing tempers into a single species. Material films, found footage films, hand-made films, structural films, a broad variety of surrealistic films, diary projects, and hybrid forms are subsumed beneath this vague penumbra. Debates about the bloodlessness of our naming are as old and stereotypical as the term itself, which is used here despite its uneasy hold.

In the public consciousness experimental film doesn't exist at all. Its mention might conjure visions of crude, pretentious artifacts whose grand ambitions have put theory in the place of action. It has been accused of practicing the most grotesque kind of self love, of exaggerating the consciousness of its form, of mannerism. While largely unspoken, all this remains connected to the term. In a time of elaborate virtual worlds and computer generated consciousness, experimental films seem like relics of a bygone age, archival work from the stone age of the moving image. While the experimental filmer "is busily ana-logging 101 years of swirling bromide, the rest of the world has already moved on into the cold digitized hell that awaits the lovers of the Magic Lantern." (Phil Solomon)

Homeless from its outset, treated as a footnote to official film histories, removed from the visual arts where it has historically derived its aesthetic impetus, it has been pushed to new margins and new responsibilities. Ignored by the film industry and its critics, experimental cinema has long labored against its complete disappearance from the public sphere.

It has no fixed address, no home, and no single identifying feature. But it favors the precision, the dense intensity of the short form. There are only a few experimental films of feature length, and these are often based on literary patterns, its segments unfolding like chapters in a book, like Werner Nekes' *Uliisses*. Or they are composed in mosaic fragments, like Mara Mattuschka's *Loading Ludwig* or Michael Brynntrup's *Jesus-Der Film*. The analogy between experimental cinema and the lyric form in poetry has been often remarked. In both, the expression of the Imaginary is primary. Both generate a form of their own, sui generis, and a language which breaks with conventional syntax. Both forms require an active recipient who completes the empty spaces in these works.

The short form is the chosen home of experimental film. Perversely, these films are rarely seen at large short film festivals like Clermont-Ferrand or Tampere. At these celebrations the near exclusive interest of the organizers is dedicated to short dramatic work. Experimental films are commonly sequestered in special programs held at the margins of the festival, or else ignored altogether. The entry forms of most short festivals have categories for animation, drama, and documentary, but neglect innovative or hybrid forms.

Experimental filmmakers are notorious individualists, which might account for their failures to lobby on behalf of their own. There are no systems of distribution and exhibition here, no

equivalent to distribution initiatives like Canyon Cinema, Light Cone, or Sixpack Film (Vienna). Recently in Frankfurt, the Initiative Experimentalfilm was founded whose expressed goal, amongst others, was the creation of a central data bank for experimental cinema. If experimental film does not want to degenerate in splendid isolation, it needs such activities, to lend to its distribution some of the insight and invention that has gone into its making.

In the early 80s Germany was blessed with a vigorous distribution network and a high standard of experimental cinema, both blossoming unexpectedly. The movement was viral, pervasive, and spread with an impetus that tried to define its project anew, leaving in its wake the tired, stylistic exercises of "classical" experimental film. This had been a cinema "eager to teach new ways of seeing and to instruct a course in the new grammar, the new language of vision." (Dietrich Kuhlbrodt) Stridently dogmatic, lacking effect and scarcely shown, the experimental film of the 70s had retreated into the protective bunkers of the museum. Its practitioners sought to erase all narrative elements, embracing instead a practice which referred only to itself, like a filmic boomerang, its cryptic insignias securing its withdrawal into the vaults of modernity, far from the prying eyes of the public.

By the early 80s, the preserves of a removed aestheticism had closed, production increasingly determined by a radical subjectivity less theoretically determined than ever before. The author occupied the center of this work, the necessities of their lives inspiring new forms in film. This interest in the first person "reduces the radius but deepens the perception" (Karsten Witte). New work would freely weave document and fiction, original and appropriated footage, subverting, then renewing paralyzed genres like the orthodox documentary film.

Experimental film of this period established its own homelessness as a program, leaving behind the established places of cinema culture. It could be seen in youth and cultural centers, in clubs and bars, galleries, squats, and exclusively devoted super-8 cinemas. Older forms, like the psychodramas of the 40s and 50s were rehabilitated, not in the service of repetition, but as a renewal which could maintain lines of tradition without being swallowed by them. The experimental filmmaker travels without map or compass, equally allowed to return to the past or imagine the future. The term of practice shift. Wolfgang Max Faust: "Everyone has to find their own way now... the principle of acceleration inimical to our traditional idea of the avant-garde has vanished." Sharon Sandusky continues in this vein, exposing the ideology of permanent progress which haunted avant-gardes of the past, reducing them to movements of formal innovation, taking their place in our modernist industrial heritage.

Today filmmakers revisit the past in order to relieve the tyranny of the present tense, working with found footage to reinvolve histories which can only be understood, only imagined, in the present. Their investigations have helped clear the shelves of the shallow Brakhage imitations passed through exhausted cameras bent on imitating styles, like forgers in a museum.

Expecting breathless technical innovations from experimental film means reducing it to a kind of test laboratory. Or it can be pressed into the service of a narrative cinema, bent on avoiding risk in a relentless presentation of old stories, cannily wrapped in new visual effects. For all that, MTV remains better equipped to create new styles, to evoke a visual sophistry, than any experimental filmmaker.

Amidst growing job insecurities, the upholding of success as the final arbiter of value, the loss of cultural monies, the recourse of the younger generation was the cheap super-8 equipment of their parents. Or some years later, in North America, the use of Fisher Price video cameras, the low-tech children's toy, provided alternatives to an impasse whose origins are international, but whose effects are felt locally, and with irresistible force. These models of production, inspired by the freedom of the amateur, should not make us believe that more ambitious projects can do without public funding. The image of the camera stylo romanticizes the real situation, covering over the tough, economical reliances of the filmmaker.

The sadness of the world's creation has little to do with the genesis of experimental film. In this beginning they've left the word behind. Experimental films prefer shimmering nuances of meaning to the retelling of stories already known, already understood. They're created in emotional border territories, spaces between which cannot, or will not, be named. The interest of the experimental filmmaker is rarely dedicated to those phenomena which have found their definitive expression. Instead, they share an interest in ambiguity, in the unsettled states which cannot be classified. In a place which obtains before language. That's why it's difficult to present them in conventional screenplay production applications.

This is just part of the "problem" of experimental film. These films invite the audience to an "open and plural reading" (Peter Tscherkassky). A bewildering variety of interpretations announce themselves. On the one hand, a rich complexity, full of nuance and allusion, and on the other, a lack of mass appeal. We are used to being led by the hand of the film's story, and for the film critic it's much easier to cling to this storyline than to create a language adequate for new images. Only a handful of curators have treated experimental film with the personal urgency that Alf Bold did, the former artistic director of Cinema Arsenal in Berlin, whose efforts on behalf of German experimental film can't be too highly stated. In community oriented media work, those films are favored which may be easily reduced to a particular message. The easier it is to reduce a film to its "shadow world of messages" (Susan Sontag) the sooner it may be used to underline the already understood, the déjà vu of consensus.

Last year in Oberhausen Jonas Mekas presented a program entitled Useless Cinema. Here was a world purged of utility, devoted to all that could not be signed or put to use, whose inhabitants have become hunters of habit. Creating useless things for a filmmaker means settling on the outskirts, the furthest margins of film economies. The experimental filmmaker arrives there, "stowaways on a ship they would rather captain" (Peter Weibel) with impeccable credentials. They continue to make short, formally sophisticated work, narrating subversive or risky themes and produced on substandard, amateur gauges.

The film scientist Christine Noll Brinckmann, considering the marked decrease in production and public visibility of experimental film called this a "phase of sobriety." Due to waning financial support established festivals like the Bonn Experi and Nixperi have long ceased to exist. Others, like the Osnabrück Festival that started as an experimental film workshop in the early 80s, have shifted focus to a broad area of media art. Arte's Snark TV program, formerly dedicated to innovative shorts, has been replaced by another exhibiting short narratives.

If the experimental short film remains in critical condition there needs still to be discussed the more obvious dilemma and regression of the dramatic short film. These films continue to threaten the survival of a cinema of difference with their relentless mono-culture of repetition, pandering to audiences willing at best to accept short films as appetizers, curtain raisers. Old wine in old bottles.

To demand endangered species status for experimental film would be premature. Many filmmakers use the present "phase of sobriety" in a constructive way to reconsider past positions in a media landscape that continues to change shape. The real dilemma of experimental film begins after production. So long as the world of visual art stands at one remove, film critics continue to behave as Hollywood taste testers, and theaters/festivals reduce short film to its populist denominator, the survival of experimental film remains in doubt. We are in danger, as Birgit Hein puts it, of losing "a crucial part of our cultural identity." Yet its homelessness is its chance, for it guarantees the necessary mobility and independence to deal with permanently changing conditions. To forge new alliances, loose new impulses and remain unpredictable.