# 2 Modernism and the avant-gardes

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The avant-garde and other alternatives

The types of cinema that I will be discussing are extremely varied, and it might be argued that the only thing that unites them all is their status as 'other' to orthodox narrative filmmaking. Another index of this heterogeneity is the cluster of distinct, if overlapping, terms denoting the filmic practices to be discussed here: art, avant-garde, experimental, independent, and underground, to name the most widespread. Initially, it is useful to bracket these terms and to frame the discussion more generally in terms of modes of film practice. Such a practice is defined by an integrated set of economic, institutional, and aesthetic norms (Bordwell *et al.* 1985, pp. xiii–xv, 378–5).

From our point of view, the most pertinent modes of film practice are art cinema and the avant-garde, both of which contrast with the classical Hollywood mode of film practice. While the latter is characterized by its commercial imperative, corporate hierarchies, and high degree of specialization and division of labour, the avant-garde is an 'artisanal' or 'personal' mode. Avant-garde films tend to be made by individuals or very small groups of collaborators, financed either by the filmmakers alone or in combination with private patronage and grants from arts institutions. Such films are usually distributed through film co-operatives, and exhibited by film societies, museums, and universities (consequently, such films can only usually be seen in urban centres—and only in a handful of those with any regularity). Importantly, this alternative system of production, distribution, and exhibition is not driven by profit. Avant-garde films rarely break even, let alone make a profit, through the markets of either the mass commodity or the luxury item. There is no market in the negatives of avant-garde films, and truly famous practitioners of avant-garde film have made their fame and fortune either through other activities (Andy Warhol), or through moving into the realm of the art film (Warhol, Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway), discussed below. Most avant-garde filmmakers make a living as teachers, technicians within the film industry, or through other day-jobs. In this respect, the filmic avant-garde is markedly different from the avant-garde in music, literature, and especially painting—a fact which is obscured by the tendency of critics to talk of *the* avant-garde, as if its conditions of existence were identical from discipline to discipline.

Within the domain of cinema, the avant-garde differs not only from Hollywood cinema, but from that other mode of film practice known as art cinema (even if there have been many practical and aesthetic cross-overs, from Fernand Léger and Germaine Dulac to Chantal Akerman, Jarman, and Sally Potter). Art films are typically characterized by aesthetic norms that are different from those of classical narrative films; they are made within a somewhat less rationalized
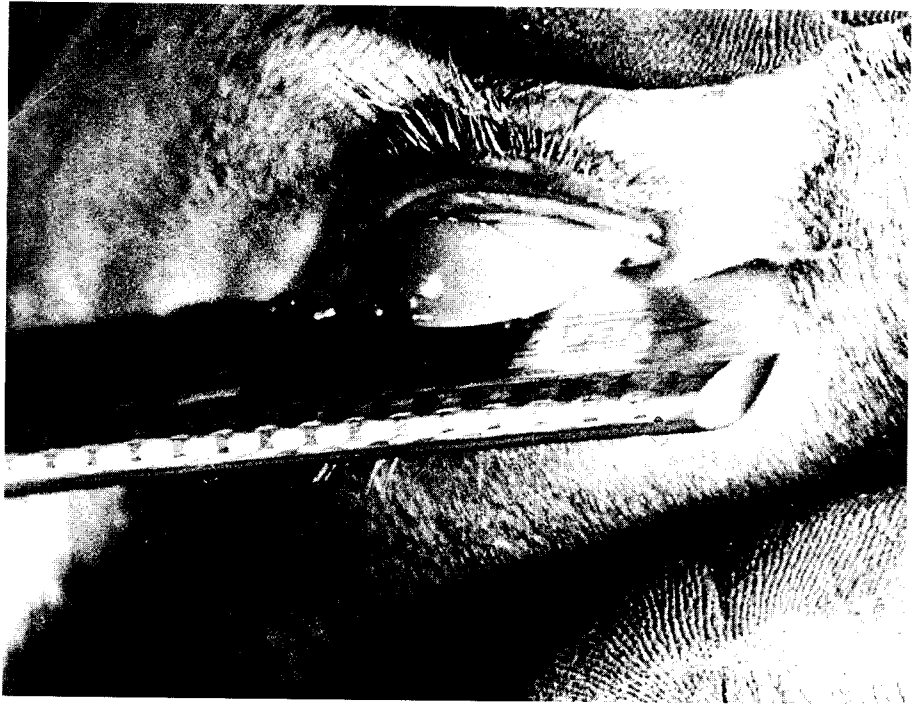
The aggressivity of the avant-garde—the eye-slicing scene in Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1928)

system of production; and they are often supported by government policies designed to promote distinctive national cinemas. But art cinema is still a commercial cinema, which depends for its existence on profits, rather than the more ethereal rewards of status and prestige.

So much for the economic and institutional nature of the avant-garde; what of its cultural and aesthetic character? If mainstream cinema is governed by an ethos of entertainment—with all the associations of escapism and leisure implied by that term—the avant-garde, by contrast, aims to challenge and subvert. At its most radical, the avant-garde asks us to rethink fundamentally our preconceptions about cinema. The tone of this challenge may vary widely, from the aggressive stance of *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, France, 1928) (the notorious eye-slicing scene being an apt emblem of its attitude towards the spectator), to the wit and playfulness of Robert Breer's work. An evening of avant-garde films ought to be thought-provoking and stimulating, but offers no guarantee of being pleasurable or beautiful in the conventional senses.

The 'otherness' of the avant-garde has been conceived in two distinct ways—as a *parallel* phenomenon and as a *reactive* phenomenon. P. Adams Sitney

argues that the relationship of the avant-garde to commercial cinema is one of 'radical otherness', in which each operates 'in different realms with next to no influence on each other' (Sitney 1974, p. viii). Although Sitney's study is the classic work on the American avant-garde, this has become an unusual perspective. More typical is the view of David James (1989), who sees the avant-garde as a 'reactive' or 'critical' phenomenon, continually challenging and undermining both the established values of mainstream society and the norms of orthodox aesthetic practice. Doubtless there have been individual avant-garde filmmakers who have had little knowledge or interest in commercial cinema, and thus in intentional terms were forging a parallel aesthetic. But looked at from a social perspective, even the work of such filmmakers becomes bound up in the larger rhetoric of the institutions of the avant-garde.

But from where, one might ask, do these cultural and aesthetic attitudes come from? A full sociological exploration of this question is still to be undertaken, and is certainly beyond the scope of this chapter. One widespread view, articulated in different contexts by the art critic Clement Greenberg (1939) and the philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1947/1979), is that the subversive strategies of the avant-garde are a reaction to the rise of mass culture. Such

'kitsch' culture—to use Greenberg's term—relentlessly reduces art to stereotyped patterns incapable of arousing active, intelligent responses. The formulaic nature of mass culture offers only a debased sentimentality, providing nothing more than a temporary respite from the regimentation of work. The fundamentally stagnant nature of mass culture is masked, however, by a continual striving for superficial novelty, and to this end the 'culture industry' (Adorno's phrase) co-opts every genuine cultural expression to its own ends. And it is this that gives rise to the avant-garde, the difficulty and obscurity of which is a deliberate act of resistance to such recuperation. The preservation of a sphere of *autonomous* artistic practice—that is, one guided by internal processes of development, not by the demands of the socio-political order—becomes, paradoxically, a political gesture. It functions—or so Adorno and Greenberg, in their different ways, argue—as a form of resistance to a society which attempts to rationalize, commodify, and so degrade every aspect of life; in the words of Adorno, to reduce even the 'purposelessness' of art to the 'purpose' of commerce.

Of the many things that such 'alternative practices' have challenged, narrative and 'realism' have often been prime targets because of their perceived dominance in commercial filmmaking. What counts as 'realism' is an immensely complex issue, but what is objected to is the claim to realism on the basis of an accurate rendering of the perceivable aspects of the world—continuity of time and space, for example—while equally real, if not directly visible, social and psychological processes are either ignored or mystified. Narrative, or more particularly the kind of traditional narrative form associated with the nineteenth-century novel and the Hollywood film, has been blamed for a variety of evils, but once again a constricting realism is central. 'Classic realism', it is argued, presents a contingent view of the world as if it were a necessary, inevitable one, and so inhibits both psychic freedom and any impetus towards progressive social change. Films conforming to such 'realism' are thought to induce a kind of passivity in the spectator, while anti- or non-realist texts demand a much more active response. The German dramatist Bertolt Brecht is one of the most influential sources for the critique of 'surface realism' and the contribution of traditional narrative to it, though kindred attacks can be found in Surrealism, the French *nouveau roman*, and the circle of writers associated with the journal *Tel quel*, all of

which have fed into alternative filmmaking at some point. A recurrent motif in the history of avant-garde cinema is the idea that cinema need not have become a narrative form at all, but could rather have modelled itself on other art forms, especially painting and music. In his book *Abstract Film and Beyond* (1977), Malcolm Le Grice constructs a history of avant-garde cinema in just these terms, counterposing the origins of orthodox narrative cinema in literature and theatre with the painterly, poetic, and musical origins of the first avant-garde experiments. In doing this, Le Grice was elaborating a gesture made earlier by, among others, Léger, Dulac, Maya Deren, and the art historian Élie Faure: 'There will some day be an end of the cinema considered as an offshoot of the theater, an end of the sentimental monkey tricks and gesticulations of gentlemen with blue chins and rickety legs' (1923/1967: 4). The most extreme statement of this 'anti-narrative' sentiment may be found in the work of the 'structural-materialist' filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s (to whom we will return). But surveying the history of the avant-garde as a whole, it would be more accurate to say that narrative has been displaced, deformed, and reformed, rather than simply expunged altogether.

Modernism and the avant-garde

The concept of the avant-garde is intimately related to those of modernity and modernism. 'Modernity' refers to the network of large-scale social, economic, technological, and philosophical changes wrought by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. 'Modernism' is usually used to denote the period of dramatic innovation in all of the arts, from around the end of the nineteenth century (Symbolism and Aestheticism) up to the Second World War, when the sense of a fundamental break with inherited modes of representation and expression became acute. Modernism is thus above all associated with a pervasive formal self-consciousness, though many would also identify a thematic preoccupation with the modern city and its technologies—with the exhilaration of speed and rapid development, but also the potential for physical, social, and emotional dislocation (the latter erupting amidst the former in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* ('Berlin: Symphony of a City', Germany, 1927).

Renato Poggioli has described the avant-garde as a 'culture of negation' (1968: 107–8). This commitment to ceaseless (self-)critique may be seen as a prime instance of the modernist emphasis on the new (although, as we shall see, the relationship between modernism and the avant-garde is a matter of considerable controversy). While Poggioli's study *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* pays little attention to film, it analyses the very notion of the avant-garde and relates its history. The term 'avant-garde' is military in origin, referring to the 'advance party' who interrogate the terrain ahead of the main army. (The military basis of the metaphor is sustained by titles like 'Film: The Front Line' (e.g. Rosenbaum 1983) a series of books on contemporary avant-garde filmmaking begun in the 1980s.) In mid-nineteenth-century France, the term was applied metaphorically to revolutionary political groups (in just the way that one speaks in English of 'vanguardist' politics). Towards the end of the century the term's use was extended so as to encompass the idea of, in Robert Hughes's phrase, 'social renewal through cultural challenge'—rather than overtly political activity. This leads Poggioli to talk of 'two avant-gardes'—a political and a cultural avant-garde, which sometimes walk hand in hand but by no means always do. This phrase was later used by Peter Wollen in a very similar fashion to discriminate what he argued were two rather different currents of 'avant-gardism' within film history (Wollen 1975/1982a). First, there is the apolitical avant-garde, concerned more with developing a purist film aesthetic, running from Léger and others in France in the 1920s through the co-operative movements in post-war Europe and the United States. Second, there is a political avant-garde, running from

the Soviet montage directors in the 1920s through to the work of such directors as Jean-Luc Godard and Miklós Jancsó from the 1960s onwards. While Wollen's account has the virtue of giving us a broad perspective on the history of avant-garde practice and in making connections across that history that may not be obvious, its vice lies in its over-simplification of specific phases of avant-garde filmmaking. Some avant-gardists were apolitical, some overtly political, some only implicitly so. Many were members or fellow travellers of the leftist parties, but some avant-gardists, notably in Italy and pre-revolutionary Russia, aligned themselves with the far right. As David James has argued, the positing of a 'single, transhistoric, self-regulating avant-garde' occludes important differences in the economic, cultural, and aesthetic character of superficially similar movements. James argues rather that there is a 'spectrum of alternative practices which develop and decay with historically specific needs and possibilities' (1989: 22).

Moreover, Wollen's use of the phrase 'avant-garde' cuts across the one we began with—that is, as a mode of film practice—in that his two avant-gardes share the 'critical' stance, but otherwise differ dramatically in terms of their institutional and economic foundations. We can see this by comparing the Surrealists (part of what Wollen terms the apolitical avant-garde) with the Soviet montage filmmakers (the first manifestation of an overtly political avant-garde), both active in the 1920s and early 1930s. The Soviets—chiefly Alexander Dovzhenko, Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, V. I. Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov—began their careers in the early years of the new communist state. Like Soviet artists in other fields—the Constructivist painters, for example—they were concerned to harness radical formal strategies to Bolshevik rhetoric. Until the 1930s such experimentation was supported by the state (though not without controversy). Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926), and Dovzhenko's *Arsenal* (1929) all relate tales of revolution drawn from Soviet history, organized around either a typical, 'positive' hero, or the 'mass hero' (the proletariat in general), or both. These narratives form the basis of an agitational aesthetic, in which editing—as the label 'montage' implies—plays a crucial role. Whether conceived primarily in terms of architectural construction (Kuleshov), dialectical conflict (Eisenstein), or the musical interval (Vertov), montage aimed to infuse the narrative with a conceptual interplay out of which a revolutionary argument would emerge. The brutal

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The political avant-garde—montage imagery in *Arsenal* (1929)

inequalities of the Tsarist regime, for example, are forcefully rendered in the opening montage of *Arsenal*. Shots of the Tsar writing a stupefyingly dull diary entry ('Today I shot a crow') are intercut with shots of an old woman collapsing from exhaustion as she sows a field, and others depicting frustrated factory workers, hungry children, and a man beating a scrawny horse in desperation.

France provides us with the first example of a fully fledged avant-garde film community in a liberal democracy. Over the course of the 1920s a set of institutions developed through which non-commercial films were made, distributed, exhibited, and discussed critically (Abel 1984). While there were certainly tensions and disputes within the French avant-garde, and many of them centred on political issues, it is not possible to boil them down to a political and an apolitical strain. Ian Christie (1979) has proposed a tripartite division. First, there were the filmmakers associated with the notion of 'Impressionism: Abel Gance, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Marcel L'Herbier, and the early Germaine Dulac. These filmmakers generally made narrative films which dwelt upon subjective experience, and experimented with the ways in which cinema could render aspects of that experience (e.g. Epstein's *La Glace à trois faces*, France 1927). Many of these films were feature-length and exhibited commercially; in other words, they really constitute an early effort to forge a national art cinema. The second strand Christie picks out is that associated with the notion of 'cinéma pur' (akin to Élie Faure's 'cineplastics'), in which the formal and often abstract exploration of cinematic possibilities dominated. Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (France, 1924) mixes such exploration with other tendencies; later films by Henri Chomette and Germaine Dulac were 'purer' still. The abstract experiments of cinéma pur have come to be thought of as the quintessential modernist aesthetic.

Many authors regard the terms 'avant-garde' and 'modernism' as essentially synonymous. Others, such as Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Thomas Crow (1981), and (writing specifically on cinema) Paul Willemen (1984), treat them as overlapping but distinct. For them, modernism most appropriately describes a certain kind of formal innovation in the arts (above all, autonomous, reflexive strategies, rooted in the Aestheticism of the late nineteenth century) while avant-gardism implies something more radical, namely an attack on the very institutions and definitions of established practice (including the notion of artistic autonomy, that is, of a complete separation of art from socio-political life). (It should also perhaps, be noted that some commentators, like John Harwood (1995), argue that the term 'modernism', originally nothing more than an umbrella term for the whole range of experimental artistic practices during the period, now carries a spurious explanatory and evaluative force, implying as it does that radically different artists were all in the grip of an underlying, unified *Zeitgeist*. The same could be said of the term 'avant-garde'.)

If we accept the definition argued for by Bürger and Willemen, then the honorific 'avant garde' is most aptly applied to the third grouping of alternative filmmakers in France identified by Christie, the Surrealists—even if, in a rhetorical gesture utterly typical of the avant-garde, the Surrealist poet Robert Desnos lambasted the notion of the 'avant-garde', associated as it was for him with the Impressionists and the Aestheticism of

Jean Cocteau. The dynamic of 'negation' is not restricted to a criticism of mass culture by everything outside it, but operates within the field of avant-garde artistic practice as well. Nothing is more characteristic of the avant-garde than disputes within its ranks about which subgroup is most deserving of the epithet.

Surrealism was born out of the ashes of an earlier movement, Dada. Dada had been founded in 1916 by a group of expatriate artists in Zurich, but the movement became an international one, with practitioners adopting the banner in Berlin, Cologne, and New York. Tristan Tzara, the Romanian poet who became the leader of the movement, moved to Paris, which became the major centre for Dada, as it was later for Surrealism. Dada is a nonsense word, and as such is a clue to the nature of the movement, which was anarchic, violently anti-traditional, and vociferously anti-bourgeois—at least rhetorically. Many of the Dada artists had been involved in the First World War, and the Dada movement has been understood as a reaction of disgust at a society which could sustain such a barbaric war. If the war was the end-product of a society supposedly built on the principles of rationality espoused by Enlightenment philosophers, then the means of protest against this society would have to be irrational. This is the context in which Marcel Duchamp began to exhibit his 'ready-mades'—ordinary objects, like bicycle wheels and the urinal he named 'Fountain', signed 'R. Mutt', and presented as a sculpture. In doing so, Duchamp offended not only the assumption that art involves creative effort, but also the assumption that only certain objects are appropriate subject-matter for art, and this does not include utterly utilitarian ones. In the words of Thomas Elsaesser, Dada sought 'ways of radically short-circuiting the means by which art objects acquire financial, social, and spiritual values' (Elsaesser 1987: 17), thus fulfilling Bürger's definition of the avant-garde as an attack on the foundations of artistic institutions.

Several artists associated with Dada made films, including Hans Richter and Man Ray. The most accomplished Dada films—completed some time after the movement had disintegrated—was René Clair's *Entr'acte* (France, 1924). Two aspects of the film stand out. First, while the outlines of a narrative can be found—involving the shooting of a man and his subsequent funeral—the energies of the film are invested in a variety of non-narrative strategies which cut across and often completely submerge its progress. Since narrative is a form of rationality—we explain ourselves

through stories revealing our reasons for doing things—it becomes an object of attack, along with standards of propriety (scattered across the film are 'crotch-shots' of a ballerina, ultimately revealed to be a bearded man in drag). Narrative logic is replaced by an unpredictable mix of associative and abstract links. Second, the film was originally conceived and projected as a part of a larger performance: the film acted as an intermission (the literal meaning of 'entr-acte') within the Dada ballet *Relâche* ('Cancelled'). The scenario for the film was the creation of the painter Francis Picabia, who wrote the ballet with the composer Erik Satie (the two of them also 'star' in the film). Thus, although the film was directed by a figure who was to sustain a career as a film director, it emerged very much out of collaboration with artists working in the plastic and musical arts. This was typical of avant-garde film production in the 1920s, and to a lesser degree continued to be so throughout its history.

Surrealism was a more formal movement, with a dominant leader (André Breton) and a more elaborate theory, but which nevertheless continued the Dada interest in the irrational. This was now buttressed by explicit appeals to Freud's theory of the unconscious. In an article from 1927, Breton identified two 'methods' of Surrealist composition: automatism (the attempt to relinquish conscious control of design in the actual creation of the art object), and the controlled depiction of dream and unconscious imagery. What the two methods share is the depiction of chance and 'marvellous' juxtapositions, creating an impression of randomness and irrationality for the viewer, and thus a rejection of the idea that art must cling to the representation of an everyday visible reality.

Another notable feature of Dada and Surrealism was a fascination with popular culture: the Surrealist canon of filmmakers includes Georges Méliès, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and the popular French serial Fantômas. This was a fascination shared by many other modernist and avant-garde artists: an animated 'Charlot' (Charlie Chaplin) figurine introduces Léger's *Ballet mécanique*, while *Entr'acte* juxtaposes its ballerina with a host of references to popular attractions—fairground shooting-ranges, chase films, and roller-coasters. This suggests that the 'culture of negation' is a little more complicated than it at first appears, for what we have here are approving references to the very mass culture which the avant-garde is said to negate. Pierre Bourdieu, in his monumental sociology of culture, class, and taste *Distinction*, provides a clue: 'the

avant-garde defin[es] itself in a quasi-negative way, as the sum of the refusals of all socially recognized tastes: refusal of the middle-of-the-road taste of the big shop-keepers . . . refusal of bourgeois taste . . . refusal of the teachers' pedantic taste . . . And so the logic of double negation can lead the artist back, as if in defiance, to some of the preferences characteristic of popular taste' (1979/1984: 294). This attitude is delightfully and succinctly expressed in a slogan used by the German Dadaist Georg Grosz: Chaplin beats Rembrandt!

These textual strategies were echoed by the viewing habits that the Dadaists and Surrealists adopted, at least apocryphally. Breton claims that groups of them would drift in and out of cinemas, disregarding the beginnings and endings of particular films, and break out picnic hampers and champagne while they watched. The effect of such fleeting and broken attention would be to undermine narrative unity and turn fragments of narrative films into prompts for an oneiric, associative spectatorship. Such behaviour also evinced a nostalgia for an earlier era of 'primitive' cinema, when attending the movies shared more with the boisterous atmosphere of the fairground and vaudeville than with bourgeois theatre or opera. The historical accuracy of such an image of early cinema is less at stake here than the fact that such an image was used to upset more 'refined' conventions of spectatorship. What emerges in France of the 1920s is a dialectic, rather than simple negation, of avant-garde and popular culture: the avant-garde may oppose what it takes to be bourgeois taste, but in doing so it frequently embraces and transforms aspects of popular culture.

The Surrealists had been inspired by the Russian Revolution to believe in the possibility of a radically new society, and for a period in the late 1920s they formally allied themselves with the French Communist Party. There was always a tension, though, between Surrealist aesthetics and the demands of direct political agitation. The alliance with the Communist Party eventually broke down in 1935, when 'socialist realism' was adopted as the official aesthetic of the Communist Party, first in the Soviet Union and then in Western Europe. In the Soviet Union itself, Eisenstein, Vertov, and the other montage directors increasingly attracted criticism—for the alleged exclusivity and élitism of their innovative work—in spite of its explicit Bolshevik commitments. Experimental montage was curtailed when socialist realism became mandatory in the Soviet Union in 1934. Thus, for all the differences between the

Soviet montage movement and the Surrealists, there is an important parallel between them in their incompatibility with unalloyed and unadorned political agitation, manifest in the events of 1934–5 in both France and the Soviet Union. That said, state repression of the avant-garde was much more obvious under the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet Union and Germany, where avant-garde practice was denigrated as, respectively, 'formalist' and 'degenerate'. In both cases, avant-gardism was stamped out because it conflicted with, or merely failed to serve, official state policy. The dramatic decline of the European avant-garde in the 1930s is thus connected with a paradoxical feature of the avant-garde ethos discussed by Poggioli (1962/ 1968). Avant-garde artistic practice can only flourish under liberal political regimes, which are willing to tolerate vigorous expressions of dissent against the state and society more generally. In this respect the avant-garde bites the hand that feeds, or, in Poggioli's words, it pays 'involuntary homage' (1968: 106) to the bourgeois liberal democracies it attacks.

Post-war art cinema, political modernism, and Third Cinema

The rise of fascism and the arrival of war definitively broke up the pre-war avant-garde movements in the most literal sense: an entire generation of artists was geographically displaced, politically silenced, or co-opted. After the war, three forms of cinema developed with links to the pre-war experiments. First, within the institutions of the international art cinema, filmmakers like Godard, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Glauber Rocha, Nagisa Oshima, Gillo Pontecorvo, Jan-scó, Dušan Makavejev, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Rául Ruiz produced feature-length works which integrated radical-left politics with varying degrees of aesthetic experimentation. Second, in Europe and more visibly in the United States, a new generation of 'artisanal' avant-gardists emerged, whose interests were extremely diverse, ranging from a continuation of the abstract experiments of the 1920s to political satire. In the 1960s a third type of radical cinema emerged, reviving and developing the agitational practices of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. This militant, 'engaged' cinema shared with the artisanal avant-garde small-scale production and co-operative distribution, and the leftist political agenda of some art cinema

directors; but it disdained the stress in both art and avant-garde cinema on authorship and aesthetics in favour of agitation and political intervention on specific issues.

Although the notion of an art cinema had existed since at least the formation of the Film d'Art company in France in 1908, it was not until after the Second World War that European art cinema became firmly established, with the succession of movements such as Italian Neo-Realism, the French Nouvelle Vague, and the New German Cinema. A number of factors account for its rise at this point: new legislation in many of the European countries to promote indigenous film cultures, combined with new opportunities for foreign films within the American film market as a result of the dismantling of vertical integration.

The 'art' in 'art cinema' is differentiated from the art of other cinemas in two ways. First, art films are usually expressive of national concerns, even if these concerns are ones that, ironically, make them internationally marketable (for example, it is partly the perceived 'Englishness' of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, GB, 1985) that makes it of interest to American audiences). Second, art films attempt to conform with canons of taste established in the existing 'high' arts. That is, art films are generally characterized by the use of self-consciously 'artful' techniques designed to differentiate them from 'merely entertaining', popular cinema, these techniques frequently drawing on nationally specific legacies within the established arts (Expressionist painting in Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Germany, 1920), the *nouveau roman* in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (France, 1959) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (France, 1961), Italian opera in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem* (Italy, 1970)). These 'native' cultural markers are often commingled with allusions, critical or affectionate, to American popular culture, this internal contrast further highlighting the national specificity of such films.

This strategy enables the art film to be viewed at home as part of a national culture, and abroad as exotic or sophisticated—or both—and therefore as worthy of the attention of an educated audience. In the United States in particular, simply being European gives a film an edge in this regard, because of the view of Europe as the 'Old World', repository of Art and Wisdom. For this reason, art cinema still tends to be thought of as European art cinema, even though a substantial proportion of art-house material has for some time come from Asia, South America, Australia, and (less fre-

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quently) Africa. 'Art cinema', then, is partly a matter of the marketing and consumption of films outside their countries of production, and the circumstances of *production* of 'art' films varies widely depending on the peculiarities of particular national film industries.

In aesthetic terms, 'art cinema' encompasses a diverse range of options, from the tradition of 'quality', literary adaptations of Merchant–Ivory, to the genre reworkings of Claude Chabrol, to the experiments of Godard. Within this diversity, however, some consistent trends and patterns stand out. David Bordwell (1979) has argued that by the 1960s a distinctive art cinema 'mode of narration' had emerged. Where the Hollywood film typically featured a sympathetic protagonist pursuing his or her goal until an unambiguous conclusion was reached, the art film dwelt upon characters with less clearly defined and singular desires. This produced a narrative less clearly structured by explicit temporal markers like deadlines, and enabled the self-conscious use of style to evoke atmosphere and ambiguity. In general, the art film foregrounds narration (the process of storytelling) as much as narrative (the action itself, assumed to be the locus of attention in the classical film). Distinctive uses of style and idiosyncratic narrational stances in turn become associated with individual directors, around which the marketing of art films centre (a Chabrol film is marketed primarily as a Chabrol film, not as a thriller).

Bordwell sees this form as a modification of classical norms of narration and style, not a radical departure from them. Although the art film director has more freedom to explore stylistic options, a story with recognizable characters must still be told, generally within a screening time of between 80 and 180 minutes, since these are commercial films which must be exhibited in the art-house circuit. For these reasons, Bordwell characterizes art cinema narration as a 'domesticated

modernism', and contrasts it with the more radical departures from classical form found within the artisanal avant-garde. The key here, once again, is the freedom of artisanal filmmakers to explore spatial and temporal form in the cinema outside any obligation to tell a story; and to make films—with or without any traces of narrative—of any length, ranging from a few seconds to many hours.

Bordwell's description certainly applies to many art films of the 1960s and 1970s, and captures many of the features of art cinema which differentiate it from straightforward Hollywood-style fare. It is a description, however, only of the typical form of art films during a specific historical phase, and for this reason particular art films and directors will fall outside its ambit. These include not only more conservative filmmakers like Merchant–Ivory, where the 'art' usually amounts to little more than a national picturesque 'gloss' applied to classical narrative form, but also those filmmakers who use the feature-length format for more radical ends—aesthetically, politically, or both.

Chief among these are directors such as Godard, Straub and Huillet, and Oshima, for whom a radical political agenda must be articulated within and by radical, anti-realist form—a trend often identified as political modernism or, in Peter Wollen's terminology, 'counter-cinema'. Wollen sums up the tendencies of such filmmaking through seven contrasts with orthodox narrative filmmaking, such as those between 'identification' and 'estrangement', and 'transparency' and 'foregrounding'. The revolt and protests by French students and workers in May 1968 have come to symbolize this convergence of radical politics and experimental form, but this was the culmination of developments throughout the 1960s. In West Germany in 1963 Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet made their first film, the short *Machorka-Muff*. Like their first feature, *Nicht versöhnt* ('Not Reconciled', West Germany, 1965), it explored the history and legacy of fascist politics in Germany. *Not Reconciled*—subtitled 'Only Violence Serves where Violence Reigns'—traces the history of a family across three generations, from the First World War to the time of the film's making. The continuity of fascist beliefs and behaviour across the generations is rendered by a patchwork of flashbacks which moves us back and forth between different times without the usual transitional markers (dissolves, music, and so forth). The title thus evokes at least two connotations: the lack of reconcilia-

tion among various social groups in Germany, represented by different members of the family; and the refusal of the film to provide a resolution—a reconciliation—of the conflicts among agents and interests in the film's narrative. The film thus executes Brecht's dramaturgy in its narrative of 'leaps' and 'curves' rather than simple linear development, as it does in its muted performance style, both techniques seeking a 'distanciated' rather than highly emotive, putatively uncritical, response.

Other important instances of the convergence between experimental form and radical left politics were evident outside Europe. Oshima's *Nihon no yoru to kiri* ('Night and Fog in Japan', Japan, 1960) depicted opposition to the US–Japan Security Treaty, using stylized tableaux and an intricate flashback structure to explore conflict among different generations of protesters. In Brazil the Cinema Nôvo filmmakers—among them Glauber Rocha and Ruy Guerra—exhibited a formal inventiveness and diversity akin to the Nouvelle Vague filmmakers who had inspired them, but used them in treating overtly political narratives. In Cuba Julio García Espinosa published in 1969 his manifesto calling for an 'Imperfect Cinema'—one responsive to popular needs rather than the high production values of either Hollywood or most European art cinema. In the same year in Argentina Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino argued for a 'Third Cinema'—a cinema of militant and interventionist 'film acts' aimed at undermining the neo-colonial status quo—which would be an alternative to both Hollywood (First) and art (Second) cinema. Developing a model similar to the Soviet *agitki* (short propaganda films, often disseminated by trains and trucks to rural areas lacking screening facilities), and the similar use of film by the Vietcong in the Vietnam conflict, Third Cinema advocated the exhibition of films on immediate issues by activist, student, and worker groups, to be used as the basis of political discussion. As Solanas and Getino (1969/1976) note, a kindred movement had already developed in the United States, represented by the Newsreel collectives, and the work of such filmmakers as Robert Kramer and Emile de Antonio (a practice sustained and developed in the 1970s by Christine Choy and Third World Newsreel). Although the enthusiasm for such a project has waned or at least mutated in North America and Europe—an issue we will return to in the final section—the notion of a Third Cinema continues to be of relevance to Third World and diasporic filmmakers in Europe and North America.

The connections between European and Third World radicalism were explicitly represented in a scene in Godard's *Weekend* (France, 1967), in which two black immigrant workers declare a programme of militant resistance to economic and political oppression by the West through guerrilla warfare. Within this apocalyptic film, which views European culture and cinema as profoundly decadent—the film ends with the title 'fin du cinéma'—this dialogue represents the only vital political programme. Godard's arrival at this moment was not a straightforward one, however. His films from the beginning were marked by an unparalleled formal playfulness in which Eisenstein and Brecht were both obvious sources of inspiration. But in contrast to these earlier figures, Godard's formal inventiveness in the first phase of his career was only occasionally yoked with political radicalism. From 1964 onwards, however, an interest in socialist politics comes to occupy an ever-more central role in Godard's work. Spurred on by the events of May 1968, Godard pushed the radicalism of *Weekend* still further and formed with Jean-Pierre Gorin the Dziga–Vertov Group—named after an earlier master of political modernism, and one of a number of film cadres which formed in the wake of May 1968. The political 'essays' made by the group represented a synthesis of ideas drawn from European modernism with others derived from the activist and agitational tradition extending from the Soviets to the Vietcong (an influence cited in the black workers' speech in *Weekend*) and the followers of Third Cinema. In the late 1970s, however, Godard again reoriented himself, moving away from the heavily politicized films of the early and mid-1970s, opting for a more poetic—and commercially viable—form. Godard's retreat from an overtly radical political cinema is emblematic of the fate of political modernism in Europe as a whole.

The post-war avant-garde

Along with better-known figures such as Fritz Lang, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean Renoir, Hans Richter was among the leftist intelligentsia who fled Nazi Europe for the United States. The Second World War was a turning-point not only in the individual lives of so many artists and intellectuals, but in the history of the avant-garde as a whole. If the centre of avant-garde activity between the wars had been Europe (with Paris often identified as playing the leading role), this role passed to the United States, or, more particularly, New York, after the war. Just as Abstract Expressionism emerged in the post-war years as the first style of avant-garde painting geographically rooted in the United States, so a vigorous avant-garde film community began to develop. By 1962 a cohesive non-commercial system of production, distribution, exhibition had been created, with its centres in New York and San Francisco; a critical establishment was not long coming.

The presence of *émigrés* like Richter also played a role in these developments. Richter took up a position teaching film at New York's City College Institute of Film Technique in 1943, and in 1947 attempted to bring the aesthetics of the film avant-garde to a wider audience with the feature-length film *Dreams that Money can Buy*. Funded by the art patron Peggy Guggenheim, the film was comprised of a series of episodes, each of which represents a dream being sold by a dream salesman. Obviously enough, the film is a metaphor for commercial cinema—the dream factory. The style of each episode, however, was anything but commercial, since each was made by an established avant-garde artist (e.g. Max Ernst) and accompanied by avant-garde compositions (e.g. John Cage). Many of the episodes were reprises of avant-garde works from the 1920s. However, Richter framed these episodes with a narrated voice-over which motivates each episode as a dream designed for each client and their particular neuroses. Narrative coherence was to be the bridgehead between avant-garde aesthetics and a wider audience. But the film found little favour with the embryonic American avant-garde, perhaps because it was in the process of establishing its own institutions, and in its aesthetics reaffirming that suspicion of narrative so apparent in the pre-war European avant-garde (Maya Deren, for example, complained that 'narrative pattern has come to completely dominate cinematic expression in spite of the fact that it is, basically, a visual form'; 1946: 318). Richter had recognized that the avant-garde was 'blessed in its liberty and cursed in its alienation' (Poggioli 1968: 109) but discovered that the avant-garde community were not at this point interested in trading in any part of their aesthetic liberty for the sake of reaching a broader audience.

Of the indigenous figures in the nascent American film avant-garde, Deren is among the most significant—not just for making one of the most influential films of the tradition, but for her activities as a promoter and proselytizer of the avant-garde. Her first and most

well-known film is *Meshes of the Afternoon*, made in 1943 in collaboration with her husband Alexander Hammid (another European *émigré*). The film depicts a series of narrative loops, in which a dreaming woman (played by Deren) sees herself in a number of menacing confrontations with a husband (played by Hammid), a mysteriously cloaked figure, and several *doppelgängers*. Parker Tyler (1960), and later P. Adams Sitney, saw the film as a precursor of a major 'genre' of the American avant-garde: the 'trance' film or 'psycho-drama', in which a 'protagonist wanders through a potent environment toward a climactic scene of self-realization' (Sitney 1979: 21).

Sitney situates this concern with 'self-realization' within the Romantic tradition, that is, the dominant intellectual and literary legacy deriving from European philosophers and artists of the eighteenth-century. Expression of feeling and the transformative power of the imagination are the factors which link these twentieth-century filmmakers with earlier artists; Sitney's history is titled *Visionary Film*, stressing the powerful, shaping force of the individual artistic imagination. Other critics have disputed the appropriateness of Romantic thought as the context in which the American avant-garde is examined. While there are limitations to the approach, however, two factors weigh in Sitney's favour. First, it is hard to conceive of avant-garde culture in general without Romanticism. In its stress on innovation and the continual violation of convention over the values of tradition and the observation of rules, the avant-garde is the apotheosis of Romantic thought. Second, Sitney was in part taking his cue from practitioners who cited ideas drawn from the Romantic tradition. Chief among these was the most prolific film-maker in avant-garde history, Stan Brakhage.

Many of Brakhage's early films, like *Reflections on Black* (USA, 1955), were trance films. As his work developed, though, Brakhage massively expanded the scale and visual vocabulary of such films and intensified their subjective character. The Romantic character of Brakhage's project emerges most clearly in his collection of writings *Metaphors on Vision* (originally published as issue 30 of the journal *Film Culture*). In Brakhage's view, the human subject loses its authentic identity as it learns language, the conventions of pictorial perspective, and narrative—in other words, as it becomes socialized. By 'wrecking' these conventions, as they are embodied in narrative filmmaking, film can render an 'untutored' perception and consciousness. In *Window Water Baby Moving* (USA, 1959), which depicts his wife Jane giving birth to their first child, Brakhage pursues this effect by counterpointing the sequential development of the birth with repetitive abstract and rhythmic patterns.

By the early 1960s two new notions had entered circulation within this milieu: the New American Cinema and underground cinema. A central figure in these developments was Jonas Mekas. Writing of the 'Cinema of the New Generation' in 1960, Mekas saw promising parallels between the European art cinema. In a fashion somewhat similar to Richter in the late 1940s, Mekas envisaged a cinema reconciling self-conscious aesthetic seriousness with popular accessibility, and incorporated under this rubric everything from Brakhage, Breer, and Marie Menken to early direct cinema and independent feature narratives. In 1960 credence was given to this argument by the formation of the New American Cinema Group, comprised of filmmakers, producers, performers, and the catalyst Mekas himself. In 1961 the group published a statement in the journal *Film Culture* which, in its rejection of the 'product film' and 'official cinema', used that rhetoric of negation so typical of the avant-garde (Mekas 1961). However, the positive strategies which were to replace the 'product film' were too diverse to hold together for very long, resulting in a split between the 'purist' artisanal ethos, and a modified commercial practice. Mekas promoted the former, which, increasingly inflected by the post-war youth and counter-cultures, became known as 'underground cinema' (Mekas 1972).

Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (USA, 1963) is probably the most well-known icon of the underground cinema—partly because of its early notoriety, partly because it combines superficial accessibility with a formidable density of form. Structured by thirteen contemporaneous pop songs, the film follows the actions of a biker and his associates, dressing and preparing for a climactic race in which one of the bikers is killed. By juxtaposing the songs with the hedonistic and nihilistic activities of the biker gang, the film continually draws out of the pop songs the painful and perverse implications within them, but easily overlooked in their original context.

Another feature of *Scorpio Rising* representative of broader activities within the underground was its use of collage or assemblage—the creation of new works through found or 'quoted' material. Anger's film juxtaposes original footage with rephotographed television and cartoon material (and, of course, the soundtrack,

which is also created in collage fashion). The purest form of film collage is the compilation film: a film entirely comprised of footage lifted from other films, as in the work of Bruce Conner (and much earlier, Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart*, USA, 1936).

In *Scorpio Rising*, Anger's collage works by a process of 'reverse metaphor', in which the traits and qualities of the counter-cultural bikers are projected onto mainstream figures we would normally regard as virtuous or at least innocuous: children's cartoons and images of Christ (Peterson 1994: 160–1). Bruce Conner's work is similarly subversive and ironic. His film *Report* (USA, 1963–7) explores the Kennedy assassination through a radio broadcast relating the build-up to and aftermath of the event, against which are placed repeated shots of the motorcade, countdown leader, and other filmic detritus, and a furious climactic montage intercutting various shots of Kennedy with (among others) shots of a bullfight, a light bulb being shattered in slow motion, and an advertisement for a fridge. All of this is found footage, re-edited to suggest new meanings: the bulb becomes a metaphor for Kennedy's shattered skull, the bullfight suggesting first Kennedy's status as hero (the matador), then his descent into the role of publicly slaughtered victim (the bull), and finally his status as a commodity to be sold, like the fridge. At the most general level, the film heightens its attention to public spectacles of violence—a theme also explored by Conner's *A Movie* (1958)—by pointedly denying us a direct visual image of the moment of assassination itself.

Films like *Report*, and many other collage films, give the lie to the argument that the avant-garde in America is wholly apolitical. In addition to the artisanal works discussed so far, there also appeared in the United States in the 1960s some politicized narrative films which form a parallel with Wollen's 'political avant-garde'. Some of these were formally conventional features like *Nothing but a Man* (Michael Roemer and Robert Young, USA, 1964), which dealt with black oppression in the American south. The closer parallel is with Jon Jost, who has managed to sustain an idiosyncratic career as a 'guerrilla filmmaker' from the mid-1960s to the present day. Involved early in his career with the founding of a Newsreel office in Chicago, Jost went on to combine familiar art cinema strategies with more unusual ones. *Speaking Directly* (USA, 1974), for example, is an essay on the relations between individual, private existence, political power, and forms of representation. The film combines diary footage of

Jost's everyday existence with staged, almost allegorical demonstrations of the film's main thesis (that all filmmaking is intrinsically political, no matter how 'personal' or 'subjective' it appears to be), and collage sections using in one case documentary footage of Vietnam, and magazine advertisements in another.

A rather pointed absence in my discussion of the American avant-garde so far is the name Andy Warhol. Warhol's early filmmaking (1962–6) can be seen as a kind of hinge between the 1960s underground and the avant-garde movement which was to command critical attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s in both Europe and America: structural filmmaking. The most obvious connection between Warhol's films and the underground is the explicit representation of sexuality—straight, gay, and polymorphous—in films like *Kiss* and *Blow Job* (both 1963), *Couch* (1964), and *My Hustler* (1965). But films like *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964) (eight hours of footage of the Empire State Building, projected at sixteen frames per second) exhibit a different form of outrageousness: the refusal to provide even the most minimal dramatic or visual development.

It is in this respect that Warhol's early filmmaking adumbrates structural aesthetics. Structural films empty themselves of apparent 'content' in order to draw our attention to the functioning of a particular aspect of film technique. The most famous example is Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (USA, 1967), a film comprised of a gradual zoom shot across a loft apartment, interrupted by coloured frames, and accompanied by the sound of an ever-rising tone. Characters involved in a murder narrative stray into this space, but none of this action deflects the zoom from its continual cropping of the space or the sound from its relentless ascent through the frequencies. In Warhol's *Couch*, the use of fixed camera positions and the overt use of the length of film reels (the flare at the beginning and end of each reel is not edited out) give the film an obvious, minimal structure, and emphasize the material features of filmmaking almost in resistance to the 'scandalous' sexual actions which are depicted.

Sitney viewed Snow's work as a further development within 'visionary' cinema. If Brakhage had produced a cinema of vision, Snow's achievement was to create a cinema of the mind, in which the films metaphorically represent or explore features of human consciousness. This view of Snow's work, first proposed by Annette Michelson (1971/1978), has been lucidly elaborated by Sitney and William Wees (1982). But objections to

Sitney's argument have been more common. The most important of these seek to situate structural filmmaking within modernism rather than Romanticism (where it is assumed that modernism, while evolving from Romanticism, makes a decisive break with it). In *Abstract Film and Beyond* (1977), Malcolm Le Grice presents an alternative history of the avant-garde to that proposed by Sitney. Le Grice situates the avant-garde within modernism, in his case drawing implicitly on the influential account of modernism associated with Clement Greenberg. For Greenberg, modernism represents the phase in the history of an art when it reflects upon its materials and undergoes a kind of purification (Greenberg 1961/1973). Similarly, Le Grice traces efforts through the history of cinema to focus on the peculiar properties of film. To this is added the implication that such work is *politically* radical—an argument more explicitly made by Peter Gidal (1989)—in so far as it demystifies the means by which films are made. Le Grice's own films from this period, like *Berlin Horse* (GB, 1971), exemplify this aesthetic; but one of the purest examples of this form of reflexive filmmaking is David Crosswaite's elegant *Man with the Movie Camera* (GB, 1973), which manipulates mirrors and focus to create a series of enigmatic images of a film camera, explained as the film itself reveals progressively more parts of the apparatus. 'Structural-material' film—as it came to be known in the British context—represented the moment at which these 'specifist' concerns fully realized themselves.

Structural film dominated critical attention, and perhaps practice, for at most ten years, but it seems pivotal for a variety of reasons. It was heralded, particularly in its British manifestation, as an ultimate and pure manifestation of modernism within film. This as accompanied by attacks on other trends within the avant-garde made with even more than the usual vigour. In criticism, one consequence of Le Grice's view is the marginalization of a great deal of avant-garde practice—much of the work of the Surrealists and the underground—on the grounds that the incorporation of 'dramatic' elements undermines a film's radical and oppositional status. In filmmaking practice, this purity consisted of a more rigorous—or, to its detractors, rigid—expulsion of all vestiges of narrative. Consequently, viewers unfamiliar with the avant-garde find structural filmmaking the most puzzling and 'difficult' of its many trends. The structural phase of the avant-garde is also important in institutional terms. Although certain filmmakers had occasionally held teaching positions from the 1940s

onwards, the emergence of structural film coincided with a much greater integration of the avant-garde community with art schools, universities, and museums. Structural film, it might be argued, represents at once the apogee and the end of the avant-garde—an idea most usefully discussed in relation to the notion of postmodernism later in this chapter.

Feminism and the avant-garde

The importance attributed to structural film should not obscure other significant developments in the wake of the 1960s underground. One of these is the emergence of a more self-conscious feminist presence within the avant-garde. To some degree, avant-garde filmmaking has always provided opportunities for women's expression denied them in the mainstream, just as it has for gays. Dulac in the 1920s and Deren in the 1940s were important both as theorists and as practitioners, and both made films of proto-feminist import: *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (France, 1923) and *Meshes of the Afternoon*. There have clearly also been other women filmmakers—such as Marie Menken, a major early influence on Stan Brakhage, and later figures such as Shirley Clarke and Joyce Wieland—whose significance has been underestimated in many avant-garde histories (Rabinovitz 1991). But it is only with the emergence of the post-war women's movement in the 1960s that 'woman' as such becomes a major focus within the avant-garde.

Underground cinema embodies the notion of 'Sixties liberation', but as often as not underground films echoed, rather than challenged, the constraining representations of women found in the mainstream. Robert Nelson's exuberant neo-Dada *Oh Dem Watermelons* (USA, 1965) may subject racial stereotypes to parodic distension, but its footage of a naked woman caressing herself with a watermelon hardly subverts the sexual economy of the mainstream film, in which women are usually the object and rarely the subject of the erotic gaze. A number of women filmmakers, however, turned underground aesthetics to feminist ends, including Barbara Rubin, Anne Severson, and Carolee Schneemann. Schneemann's *Fuses* (USA, 1967) is a diary film concerned with the detail of her erotic life with James Tenney, and was made partly out of dissatisfaction with two films made by Brakhage about this relationship. The film breaks with patriarchal

conventions of the representation of women not by denying the female body as an object to look at, but by placing it in a fuller context. In addition to love-making, we see unerotic, domestic action. The naked female body is not idealized through soft focus and modelled lighting. Moreover, Schneemann is presented as an initiator in the sexual act, and shots of Tenney are just as frank and frequent as those of her.

This strategy was not welcomed by many in the women's movement at the time, because of the at least superficial resemblance between *Fuses* and porno-graphic films, which by the early 1970s had become a target for many feminists (as did earlier, apparently liberating representations of women, such as Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving*). A very different type of film, drawing heavily on feminist theory, emerged in the 1970s. In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) British critic and filmmaker Laura Mulvey argued that the narrative and visual construction of orthodox narrative films embodied a patriarchal ideology in which women were either idealized or punished, but either way diminished. Her call for the 'destruction' of the pleasures derived from such cinema—prefigured by Claire Johnston's (1973) discussion of 'women's cinema as counter-cinema'—inspired her own filmic practice (e.g. *Penthesilea*, GB, 1974, and *Riddles of the Sphinx*, GB, 1977, both made with Peter Wollen), as well as influencing that of Yvonne Rainer in the United States. Rainer's *The Man who Envied Women* (USA, 1985), for example, is structured around a female protagonist who is never visible; she is rendered only through voice-over. Her husband, the man in the title, is by contrast doubly visible, in that he is played by two actors. So the film reverses the polarity that, according to Mulvey, structures Hollywood cinema, by exempting the main female character entirely from the look of the camera and spectator. In this, as in her other films, however, Rainer does not simply adopt Mulvey's or anybody else's thesis; rather, the film interweaves a great multitude of theories, and types of footage and imagery, around a narrative core, tending to play them off one another rather than endorsing any one. In addition, the film questions the sexual politics not only of Hollywood, but also of the avant-garde itself. The film 'quotes' the opening of *Un chien andalou* and implies that the slicing of the woman's eye is not merely a provocative 'shock' image, but another manifestation of misogyny.

In their efforts to create a feminist cinema in formal—not merely thematic—terms, the work of Mulvey and

Rainer echoed that of European filmmakers like Marguerite Duras and Chantal Akerman. Such films shared with structural aesthetics a profound suspicion of conventional narrative—Rainer once talked of the 'tyranny' of narrative—but as the influence of structural film waned, narrative returned with a vengeance, becoming a major object of concern for both feminists and others within the avant-garde. Several factors motivated this renewed attention to narrative. Paul Willemen questioned the idea that there was a stable relationship between a particular kind of form (like structural form) and an 'avant-garde' or critical effect. The functioning of different strategies had to be re-addressed in each new context. Willemen argued that the investigation of historical questions was a priority, and that narrative was essential to such a project. Other filmmakers became concerned about the exclusivity of the avant-garde, a problem highlighted by structural filmmaking, and one that both Richter and Mekas had tried to solve. Sally Potter turned to narrative form and familiar narrative types in *Thriller* (GB, 1979)—albeit in a novel way—in order to connect with the pleasures of conventional narrative cinema and so address a potentially larger audience.

Along with this return to narrative came a renewed attention to expressivity in various ways. Some feminists, like Schneemann, had always found themselves out of tune with the detachment of structural filmmaking. Similar remarks were made by younger women filmmakers whose careers began in the 1980s, such as Vivienne Dick and Su Friedrich. Friedrich's *Gently down the Stream* (USA, 1981) constitutes a particularly interesting case because of the way it returns to the highly expressive mode of the trance film, while reshaping it for feminist and lesbian ends. Here, the dreams of the implied protagonist concern anxieties over her lesbian desires and religious allegiances. The gradual and painful passage to a new sexual identity is suggested by a progression of water images, each one suggesting greater control over the water than the last. Like Brakhage, Friedrich scratches words onto the surface of the film, but where Brakhage uses this as a way of underlining the personal nature of the film, in Friedrich's film scratched intertitles vie with images for domination of the film in a most un-Brakhagean manner. Identity, it is implied, will occur partly through language, not by transcending it. And like *Window Water Baby Moving*, the film is filled with birth imagery, but rather than being rendered as a natural process to be experienced in the most 'untutored' fashion pos-

sible, here it is presented as a metaphor for the dreamer's difficulty in attaining selfhood.

The return of interest in narrative and expressivity has been evident in a diverse range of practices since the mid-1970s: New Narrative, New Talkie, Cinema of Transgression, and most recently, New Underground. In contrast to the heyday of the structural films, there is little critical consensus about which mode or style of filmmaking is most important. As in the avant-garde more widely, stylistic pluralism has been a feature of avant-garde film over the last twenty years. There have been moments of such pluralism before—in the 1920s for example—but it is widely held that the contemporary situation is qualitatively different from earlier phases of avant-garde and modernist practice. This is the shift denoted by the term 'postmodernism'.

Postmodernism and the paradox of tradition

The term 'postmodernism' has come to assume a bewildering variety of connotations, but for our purposes these can be reduced to three. In the first use it refers to the stylistic pluralism noted above. In architecture, where this version of the phrase has been particularly important, it refers to the eclectic mixing of various historical styles in the design of buildings (a dominant trend in post-war architecture). The problem with this definition, at least as it is extended to film history, is that the mixing of radically different styles was already evident in the work of many 1920s avant-gardists (as we have seen). A more sophisticated version of the postmodern argument claims that it is not the mere presence of eclecticism, but its cultural position and use, that has changed. Rather than functioning within an avant-garde ethos in which the gesture of mixing styles constituted a typical attempt to occupy the position of most advanced and subversive trend, in postmodern culture stylistic pluralism marks an exhaustion of the subversive energies and ambitions associated with the avant-garde. In Fredric Jameson's words, 'all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum' of the past (1991: 115).

Writing more than a decade before Jameson, and reworking the military metaphor underpinning the notion of avant-gardism, Harold Rosenberg argued that we have entered a period in which the culture of

negation is replaced by a 'demilitarized zone, flanked by avant-garde ghosts on one side and a changing mass culture on the other' (1972: 219). The once subversive styles of the avant-garde have been assimilated by mass culture, so that the gap between nominally avant-garde products and popular, mass cultural ones is greatly reduced. Is there such a difference, one might ask, between Sadie Benning's *Jollies* (USA, 1990), which explores the filmmaker's passage into lesbianism with hand-held, pixelvision video footage and a soundtrack of rock tunes, and any number of music videos which place imagery ransacked from the avant-garde under the song being marketed? The avant-garde has become nothing more than a posture of aggression and defiance; postmodernism represents a kind of disenchantment with its high ideals. Indeed, in what is perhaps the ultimate indignity, the very phrase 'avant-garde' has now become a marketing device itself, as the name of a new line of deodorant in 1994.

Parallel with the absorption of once-subversive styles within the lexicon of mass culture, the objects of the avant-garde have become useful commodities for the 'Establishment', in the fullest sense of that sometimes vague word. 'Avant-garde' paintings and sculptures adorn the walls of major corporations and wealthy individual clients. They at once constitute useful market investments, and signify a supposed commitment to culture, education, and refinement transcending the materialism of the market. If the Cologne Dadaists had once subverted the polite conventions of the art gallery by forcing patrons to enter an exhibition through a mock lavatory, the institutions of gallery and museum have had the last laugh by simply continually expanding the objects which could accrue value by being exhibited within them (urinals, bricks, latterly dead sheep and heads sculpted from frozen blood). Peter Bürger writes of the emergence of a 'Neo-avant-garde' in the 1960s—an *institutionalized* avant-garde which, by definition, undercuts its own rhetoric of subversion (Bürger 1984: 58). More bluntly,

> **Parallel with the absorption of once-subversive styles within the lexicon of mass culture, the objects of the avant-garde have become useful commodities for the 'Establishment', in the fullest sense of that sometimes vague word.**

Christopher Butler states: 'Aesthetic subversion has . . . become revolutionary pantomime' (1980: 122).

The notion of postmodernism has proven to be compelling to many, but a host of questions can be raised about its legitimacy. A common complaint is that it overlooks the presence within modernism of the defining traits of 'postmodernism' (e.g. Crow 1981: 257). One might also question whether the idea of the avant-garde ever had the power which we assume was ascribed to it before the Second World War; perhaps this is merely a symptom of an ongoing nostalgia for an idea which was always regarded as utopian. (Rosenberg notes that doubts about the continued existence of the avant-garde have been voiced almost as long as the avant-garde has existed—not least by members of the avant-garde.) Similarly, one can question the assumption that there was a moment when avant-garde practice stood wholly outside, or successfully challenged, the operations of the art market. This is true even in the case of the filmic avant-garde, in spite of its displaced position in relation to arguments about a general, cross-media avant-garde. Avant-garde filmmaking has never been embraced by corporations and collectors (notwithstanding the support of Peggy Guggenheim in the 1940s and 1950s, and the brief flirtation of the Ford Foundation with grants to Anger, Conner, and ten other filmmakers in the 1960s). But the filmic avant-garde has become an established part of art schools and many museums, and in Britain has increasing ties with television (for which the avant-garde is another supplier of material for its ever-expanding broadcast hours). More generally, many of the stylistic practices of the filmic avant-garde—especially collage—have been adopted by music videos, TV advertising, and credit sequences (think of Michael Moore's TV Nation, USA/GB, 1994–5). If it did once maintain a more authentically avant-garde status—relative to similar practices in the other arts—it surely no longer does.

J. Hoberman argues that the moment of postmodernism can be described as the moment when the 'oxymoronic tradition of the new'—Rosenberg's description of the avant-garde—'had truly become a tradition' (1991: 117). The sceptical view would hold that, paradoxically, the avant-garde has always in practice 'truly' worked as a tradition. In the words of James Peterson, 'The American avant-garde community trumpets the ideal of aesthetic revolution, but lives a reality of refinement and revision' (1994: 186). The rhetoric of negation has always existed alongside the

practice of imitation; the dream of a 'total liberation' from all prior conventions is just that—an unattainable fantasy.

Taking all of this into account, it might be argued that reports of the death of the cinematic avant-garde have been premature, at least if we operate with a more realistic perspective regarding the ambitions and achievements of the historical avant-gardes. There are still filmmakers who work outside commercial structures, depending on their own resources and grants, and who see their work as continually challenging the stylistic and attitudinal norms of the mainstream. When we survey the contemporary scene, we can recognize descendants of all the various strains of avant-garde practice I have discussed: collage in Lewis Klahr's Tales of the Forgotten Future (USA, 1988–91), for example, or the fusion of Surrealism and the underground in The Deadman (Peggy Ahwesh and Keith Sanborn, USA, 1991). Even the goals of political modernism have survived, in the form of a politicized postmodernism in which the role of representation in politics is as central as it was for political modernism. Laura Kipnis (1986), for example, advocates the 'refunctioning' of pre-existent texts in such a way as to realize their oppositional potential, as in the re-editing of popular television shows in Dara Birnbaum's work. Here, however, the focus on politics and ideology is combined with both a suspicion of universal or 'totalizing' claims (e.g. those of Marxist class analysis), as well as the more relaxed attitude to narrative and its pleasures noted above (for example, Potter's Thriller, and some of the films associated with the 'New Queer Cinema', such as Todd Haynes's Poison, USA, 1990). And so it is that some critics talk of a 'postmodern avant-garde' (e.g. Sayre 1989)—a contradiction in terms for the version of postmodernism I began with—in which the critical, subversive, and utopian aspirations of the historical avant-gardes are sustained. The status and value of the avant-garde thus remains a contested issue, as, in different ways, it has been through most of its history.

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