

Alexander Graf, Dietrich Scheunemann (Hg.): *Avant-Garde Film*

Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi 2007. (Reihe Avant-Garde Critical Studies, Bd. 23), 405 S., ISBN 978-90-420-2305-5, € 84,-

In his preface to *Avant-Garde Film*, the latest in Rodopi's long-running series of volumes on the avant-garde, Alexander Graf identifies a double blind-spot as starting point for the essay collection. He notes that film is largely omitted from established theories of the avant-garde, while studies of experimental film uncritically deploy the concept 'avant-garde', neglecting its theoretical and historical complexities. The book aims to close "[...] the gap between theoretical approaches towards the avant-garde as defined on the basis of art and literature on the one hand, and avant-garde film on the other." (S.x) Rather than a systematic or comprehensive approach, however, the book presents a diverse collection of twenty-one local studies, many written by prominent scholars in the field, mostly focusing on close readings and cultural-historical contextualization rather than overarching theorizations of modernity and the avant-garde.

Straightforwardly divided into three chronological sections – pre- and post-war, and a 'contemporary era' beginning in the 1980s – topics range from pre-1914 futurist film to experiments in video and digital media. Two major issues recur. First, there is the question of the historical avant-garde's relation to later movements and artists: while frequently mentioned, this is surprisingly little explored in the book, in spite of its centrality to canonical reflections on the avant-garde, from Hans Magnus Enzensberger to Peter Bürger to Hal Foster. Second, more explicitly dealt with here, are questions centering on medium-specificity: film's place in shifting intra-medial configurations, the relation of essentialist rhetoric to actual practice, the way in which self-reflexivity seems to push experimental film, paradoxically, towards and beyond the boundaries of the medium.

Practices and discourses of medium-specificity are emphasized by most contributors to the book's opening section on the historical avant-garde. Germaine Dulac's films and her writings on "pure cinema" are examined by Tami M. Williams, who suggests Dulac's universalist formalism undermined the specificity of her feminist critique. Similar questions reemerge in accounts of Vladimir Mayakovsky's and Man Ray's cinema, as well as in an excellent analysis of *Limite*, the near-legendary 1930 Brazilian film by Mario Peixoto. Two pieces focus on Hans Richter: A.L. Rees suggests Richter as forerunner to the "frames and windows" (S. 55, passim.) of contemporary interface aesthetics, while R. Bruce Elder reconstructs Richter's and Viking Eggeling's collaborative path to utopian abstraction, partly through an analysis of their direct debt to Goethe's theories of color and painting, not least his demand for a "Generalmaß der Malerei," (S. 28) which underlay Richter's and Eggeling's unusually specific usage of 'counterpoint,' the ubiquitous musical-medial metaphor of the time.

A strong group of articles addresses post-war abstract and structural film. Maureen Tumin's forceful reading of Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943)

reads its spatial representations as both figurations of subjective desire and as an engagement with California architectural history, while Inez Hedges presents Stan Brakhage's four *Faust* films (Goethe, again...) as his "cinematic testament" (S.179), a revisiting of a lifelong preoccupation with expanded vision and the quasi-heroic pathos of aesthetic creation. Blending intellectual and media history, William Wees links Brakhage's aesthetics of revelation to mystical philosophies of light, and to experiments in light performance using technical instruments like the 'clavilux' or 'luminar'. Nicky Hamlyn minutely dissects Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), revealing its progression of black and white frames to be both an experiment in perception and permutation, and an intervention against prevalent modes of reading filmed images.

Kubelka here juxtaposes two kinds of medial self-reflection - on film's material properties but also on its institutional habitus. This intersection is also the central subject of two of the volume's key essays. In a dense, rewarding article on Paul Sharits, Yvonne Spielmann asserts his films' media-historical importance, claiming that his work (with flicker and fade, film-scratching and apparatus-deconstruction) is a foreshadowing of the new "frame-unboundedness" of video images and the programmability of the digital image. She highlights the quasi-scientific aspects of Sharits' experiments with perception, while also revealing the extraordinary zeal of his attacks on illusion, narrative and linearity, which he pursued to a near-molecular level.

Jonathan Walley's article on the 'paracinema' of the early 1970s, however, questions such narrow 'perceptual' formalism, by means of an analysis of the films of Anthony McCall and Tony Conrad, whose work claims 'cinematic-ness' while sometimes abandoning film entirely, or using celluloid in bizarre ways (melting, pickling, etc.). Building on this "[...] shift [in] reflexive focus from the formal to the institutional" (S.373), Walley offers the book's most explicit reflection on the nature of today's film avant-garde, suggesting it to be a "mode of filmic practice": an established tradition of formal approaches, institutions and audience expectations, an inescapable context for its contemporary practitioners, to be critiqued but never fully escaped.

This complex discussion of variant self-reflexivities, extending across different articles, underlines how much the book could have benefited from a broad introductory overview. This might also have commented on the comparative absence of the explicitly political avant-garde, brief treatments of 1970s feminism notwithstanding. It seems unfair, however, to quibble with gaps in a book which makes no claim to comprehensiveness and which, thanks to the high quality of its analyses and the range of its cross-sectional scope, will be of interest both to specialists and those in need of a stimulating introduction to the long tradition of filmic experimentation.

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