

A. L. Rees: A History of Experimental Film and Video

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A. L. Rees takes on three principle issues in his new book, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*: the first half of the book is concerned with the more challenging question of how far it is reasonable to classify aesthetic movements and developments in the history of avant-garde film and video since the invention of cinema along the lines of conventional and canonical art theory, and on how far debate on these has crossed over into current debates on post-modern cinema. This is a marvellously objective approach, illustrated by his insisting that „avant-garde film and video is a serious art form even when, as with Dada and neo-Dada, it look as if it is doing something stupid. It is sometimes important to make stupid art...” (Preface, vii). The second half of the book covers developments in the Bri-

tish avant-garde and experimental film scene since the 1950s, in which particular attention is devoted to the school of Derek Jarman and an interesting comparison of this with the work of Peter Greenaway: certainly two of the best known British avant-garde/experimental film artists/directors.

Though Rees wants his book to be useful to „readers who have seen some experimental films and want to know more about them” (Preface, vi), his discourse and extraordinarily concise style demand a detailed art-historical background of his readers, and specialised knowledge of the British scene in the second half of the book. Beginning by siting the avant-garde between futurism and post-modernism, Rees quickly comes to the well-argued conclusion that the avant-garde has failed „and been tamed by the museums that feed it; at the same time, it has succeeded too well by making outrage the norm in a current art scene which the avant-garde dominates” (p.3).

In Part One, Rees follows the origins of the moving image back to its roots in photography, siting the cubist movement as a context that offered artists the prospect of making films themselves for the first time. With modernism at its height in the 1920s – the same time avant-garde film first made its impact on the art world – these early film artists refused narrative as an essential property of the filmic medium, which led to the development of an essentially image-based aesthetic in their films (for instance, Fernand Léger’s *Ballet mécanique*, Buñuel and Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou*, Hans Richter’s *Rythmus* series or Walter Ruttmann’s *Opus I-IV*). Ironically, the term ‘art cinema’ or ‘art film’ soon came to be characterised more by its fatal attraction – as a time-based medium – for narrative, and the main thrust of the first (pre-war) avant-garde cinema remained formal experimentation and innovation on the audio-visual level. Rees does not, however, underestimate the influence of early avant-garde film on the shaping of commercial film history. Part One ends with a brief but concise account of the vibrant American underground film scene centred around Andy Warhol and Kenneth Anger in the sixties, and the birth of structural film in America and the UK.

In Part Two (Britain 1966-1998), Rees tracks the various groupings of artists and movements in the British experimental film scene from the English structuralists (Le Grice, Dwoskin, Gidal) through the post-structuralists, video artists and the Young British Artists generation (yBa) discussing the significance of political interests among artists/directors such as Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, black British and American filmmakers, the appearance of electronic images and music video to ask the question ‘where are we now?’ and accepts defeat with the words „The current state of experimental film (and now video) defies summary...” (p.119).

As the first major history of avant-garde film and video in over twenty years, this book has all it needs to become a new standard introductory text for students of art, even though it is, at times, a little too condensed.

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