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Re-writing the history of the avant-garde

Enrico Camporesi

The task of writing the history of the avant-garde cannot be considered an easy one. The term 'avant-garde' itself is in many ways problematic. Because of its intrinsic antagonism in regard to tradition, the concept of the avant-garde can appear as an attempt to break with the entire heritage of art history, or at least as a challenge to those who defend this tradition. Certain classics of art theory have conducted an in-depth inquiry into this topic, from Peter Bürger's re-reading of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (*Theorie der Avantgarde*, 1974) to the work of the October group, ranging from Rosalind Krauss' most celebrated essay 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' (1982) to Hal Foster's monograph *The Return of the Real* (1996). The issue of defining the avant-garde has been investigated thoroughly.

However, this problem seems to have somewhat different connotations when it comes to film, which is a crucial theoretical question that haunts *Film Unframed: A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema*, edited by Peter Tscherkassky (Wien: FilmmuseumSynema Publikationen/sixpackfilm, 2012) – namely, that of defining what can be called 'avant-garde' in the context of film. Although the book can be seen as a history of experimental film in Austria, throughout the entire volume one is perpetually faced with the overlapping of aesthetics and history, the brutal collision of theoretical and chronological assessments. Part of the problem comes from the structure of the book itself – a collection of essays, in most cases dealing with a single artist, lacking a unified approach.

This structural organisation does not necessarily constitute a weakness, for it opens a whole range of theoretical questions that are both challenging and stimulating. *Film Unframed* does not try to imitate one of the most important (and most debated) texts about experimental film, P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (the third edition was published in 2002), meaning that even if its ambition appears to be one of systematisation the book cannot be considered as exhaustive as Sitney's study of American avant-garde film aims to be. Instead, *Film Unframed* chooses a different path, which becomes apparent simply by looking at the name of the authors in the index. Beginning with the editor himself, Peter Tscherkassky, one is able to measure the implications of the filmmakers writing their own his-

tory (or their past). The book nonetheless distances itself from other histories of experimental film, such as Malcolm LeGrice's *Abstract Film and Beyond* (1977), in which the poetics of a singular artist work to form a rather narrow history of a wide-ranging subject, with exclusions and dismissals that are significant.

Tscherkassky's volume seems instead to privilege a variety of approaches. For example, one can find both filmmakers writing on other artists (Norbert Pfaffenbichler, 'Shadow Burns: Notes on the Film Works of Marc Adrian', pp. 114-127) as well as personal historical accounts (Hans Scheugl, 'Expanded Cinemas Exploding', pp. 128-139). These views 'from the inside' do not exclude the presence of writings by academics (Nicole Brenez, Christa Blümlinger, Maureen Turim, et al.) or film critics (such as Jonathan Rosenbaum). It is this peculiar blend that *Film Unframed* offers the reader that presents itself as a major accomplishment in mapping Austrian avant-garde film.

Experimental film history has always been located somewhere in between film and art history, which has resulted in it being extremely neglected thus far by both scholarly fields. This is in part the reason why the artists themselves have had to take on the task of systematising and putting order in this domain. Such an undertaking cannot be considered neutral given the strong implications of the artists' points of view regarding both history and theory, which necessarily narrows their opinions on certain works. When one's poetics and film output become intertwined with critical writing, the issues under consideration naturally attune themselves to an artist's personal concerns. However, in the field of experimental film this approach proves to be fruitful.

Since this type of film production is intimately related to a certain degree of 'medium specificity', the filmmakers' in-depth knowledge of the cinematographic apparatus is often a starting point for their analysis. Such is the case with Tscherkassky's excellent essay on Kubelka ('The World According to Kubelka', pp. 57-81). As he is himself a filmmaker, not to mention one of the most famous of his generation, Tscherkassky is able to conduct a surgical inquiry into Kubelka's metrical films, revealing their intimate structures to the reader and distilling the major aesthetic concerns from technical notes. Kubelka is indeed the crucial figure for the Austrian avant-garde; he is at once a pioneer, a forerunner, and one of its most important artists. Furthermore, his influence has reached beyond Austria's borders to leave its mark on the American scene, as he is one of the co-founders of Anthology Film Archives in New York, to cite just one of his many achievements.

It is not by chance that the name Kubelka also appears in the opening lines of the volume, in which Tscherkassky lays the foundations of his history of experimental film in Austria ('An Initial Mapping of an Expanding Territory', p. 15), using Kubelka's *Mosaik im Vertrauen* (1955) as an ideal starting point. This leads us to another relevant problem: Tscherkassky, echoing established historiography,

divides the filmmakers into three generations (excluding what is not yet called the 'fourth generation', made up of younger artists). The first division ideally regroups Peter Kubelka, Marc Adrian, Ferry Radax, and Kurt Kren. Among the criteria used to determine these distinctions, regardless of the differences in their individual approaches, Tscherkassky finds what he calls 'a specific and identifiable aesthetic that is profoundly linked to an associated format and its specific possibilities' (p. 20). Each generation is thus linked to a specific format: 35mm for the first, 16mm for the second, and other small gauge formats (most notably Super 8) for the third.

Here we find what seems to be the central concern of the volume, which is deeply intertwined with the previously-mentioned dilemma of defining the essence of avant-garde in the case of film. When Tscherkassky refers to 'a specific aesthetic' that arises from an 'associated format', he is still addressing the capital issue of medium specificity. However, this model seems to fall short of the truth when one looks at the work of Kurt Kren. Chronologically, he would be part of the first generation, but he becomes a pivotal figure (and the 'logical bridge' [p. 20]) for the second generation because he worked with 16mm from the very beginning of his career. When Tscherkassky discusses Kren, for instance, another paradigm enters his discourse: Viennese Actionism. Some of Kren's most famous films originated from Otto Muehl's performances (*6/64 Mama und Papa*, 1964), but instead of merely documenting them Kren 'competed' with the actions, manifesting his 'artistic independence in regard to the object of its depiction' (p. 21). Kren thus seems to reach autonomous filmic expression – but it becomes autonomous because of the way it challenges the staged performance, and in doing so the issue of medium specificity proves to be much more complex than previously suggested.

Autonomous film aesthetics reach a peak precisely when dealing directly with another form of art. This is a crucial point that does not seem to be entirely explored throughout the book, in favour of a more unifying theoretical discourse such as the one (again, by Tscherkassky) which closes the book, bearing a title that is itself programmatic: 'The Framework of Modernity: Some Concluding Remarks on Cinema and Modernism' (pp. 311-316). In this final essay, which frames the volume and brings it to its logical conclusion, the author builds upon the familiar conflict between narrative and experimental cinema. According to Tscherkassky, experimental film embodies the most rigorous expression of modernist thought, which permits its achievements to stand alongside those of modernist painting, for instance. Again, the modernist paradigm in cinema is bound to the fact that the field of experimental film focuses on the quality of 'film as film' (p. 316), stripping itself of all links with other artistic forms and aiming to achieve pure filmic expression. However, it is necessary to point out that even within the context of the Austrian avant-garde, such a proclamation is more problematic than it may first appear.

Apart from the case of Kren, there is at least one crucial moment in the Austrian avant-garde that stands out as a key example that somehow contradicts such assumptions. Reading Scheugl's excellent account of Austrian expanded cinema, 'Expanded Cinemas Exploding', one can see how the problem of medium specificity had taken a different path in the second half of the 1960s. The performances staged by artists such as Peter Weibel, Valie Export, and Scheugl himself were full of reminders of the specificity of the film medium, although they were not dealing directly – or at least not exclusively – with film. Weibel and Export's *Instant Film* (1968) was an action during which members of the audience were given pieces of transparent PVC foil with which they 'were supposed to make their own art by looking through it and framing a picture of their choosing' (p. 134). In *zzz: hamburg special* (1968), Scheugl had Ernst Schmidt, Jr. run a spool of thread through the projector at the Hamburg Film Show. Such experiments clearly demonstrate how the issue of medium specificity, or 'film as film', was reoriented in a deconstructive way. The whole filmic apparatus found itself dispersed and 'exploding' into a completely different form. These developments eventually led to a point of no return in experimental film.¹ It is precisely on this essential point that *Film Unframed* seems to lack an in-depth inquiry, although one can witness at least a first attempt to deal with later developments in the experimental film panorama in the text by Barbara Pichler ('Avant-Garde Now: Notes on Contemporary Film Art', pp. 295-308). In this essay the reader is allowed to see how the conceptual categories that were operative in the past are no longer valid, and hybridisation (of both practices and formats) proves to be the key concept to understand contemporary filmmakers and artists.

Overall, *Film Unframed* is a stimulating and essential publication, interesting also because of its flaws. When drawing conclusions, at least two major problems stand out. The first is historical: Tscherkassky tries, with admirable effort, to build a national history of avant-garde film, but such borders are not as productive as they may seem. The acknowledged influence of American filmmakers on their European counterparts (and vice-versa), just to name one example, is far too significant to be overlooked by enclosing a movement within a national context. In addition to this, a broader methodological perspective would have been necessary to deal with crucial theoretical problems, such as the issue of modernism. Instead of focusing on a teleological history of 'film as film', the research on experimental film should be able to look at the contradictions that arise from this paradigm and to problematise it. However, the structure of the book proves to be open enough to add some missing chapters in the future, unconsciously pointing towards a whole unexplored field of research.

Note

1. This issue, among others, has been recently explored in the short and dense book *The Roh and the Cooked: Tony Conrad and Beverly Grant in Europe* (Berlin: August Verlag, 2012) by Branden W. Joseph, a publication worth mentioning because it may provide some further directions in research on avant-garde film. As the subtitle indicates, the book focuses on Tony Conrad and Beverly Grant's journey to Europe in 1972 and explores the impact of this experience on their subsequent work. As Joseph points out, the couple's trip to Europe to attend Documenta 5 in Kassel is seen as a key moment for avant-garde film. It is in fact a transitional phase, in which the ultra-dominant category of 'structural film' (the manifestation of modernism in experimental film) had reached a stage of crisis. Conrad, creator of *The Flicker* (1966), who had been included in this very category by P. Adams Sitney, managed to break free from this narrowing field of production precisely as a result of his encounters while travelling in Europe. One meeting in particular, essential to the issues discussed here, proved to be decisive: an encounter with Otto Muehl and Austrian Actionism. Once back in the United States, Conrad set out to dismantle the entire paradigm of structural film with his *Yellow Movies* (screens painted on paper, the colours fading slowly with the passage of time). He went even further with a whole series of experiments with 'cooked' film strips, in which celluloid became a substitute for various recipes, to

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Moving data

Sophie Gnesda and Ramón Reichert

Mobile communication via mobile and wireless devices not only dominates social communication in terms of everyday media but has already replaced the paradigm of the computer as the medium of convergence for information and communication technologies. The development of smart phones has far-ranging impacts on the consumption of previously disconnected individual media and has laid the ground for an omnipresent convergence of media, which is strongly advancing to encompass everyday use. The smart phone has become a multi-layered media device, used as a game console, monitor, video and photo camera, and television or biometric tool, depending on its software settings, hardware configuration, and the diverse range of applications available.