

A Muted Trumpet From Afar: Ruminations on the Cinematic Avant-Garde

Peter Harcourt

It's a start if you know what not to say; through elimination, you get left with what should be said.

—Jean-Luc Godard (1961)¹

The future belongs to the film that cannot be told.

—Germaine Dulac (1926)²

Once Upon A Time

The trouble with the avant-garde is that it happened so long ago. Perhaps it didn't really happen at all. Perhaps the self-nominated avant-garde initially referenced a parallel activity, neither further ahead nor behind anything else that was going on during the formative years of cinema—less an avant-garde than a *cinéma-d'à-coté*.

With the symmetrical simplicities of his French mind, François Truffaut once suggested that the cinema is both spectacle (Méliès) and research (Lumière). Not to be outdone, with the categorical complexities of his *Swiss* mind, Godard later declared:

Let us be more precise and say that what interested Méliès was the ordinary in the extraordinary; and Lumière, the extraordinary in the ordinary.³

Certainly in Europe during the early days of cinema, there seemed little tension between the urge to tell stories and the desire to create wonder.

Although the cinemas of Europe escaped the fairground mentality that so deformed the American cinema, nevertheless there were tensions. The tensions came about through the *popularity* of film—of some films more than others. The public wanted more of the more “popular” product while remaining indifferent to the more “artistic” product. Furthermore, although blaming the merchandising mandarins is always good fun, there was from the outset, even in Europe, a mythological response to those silent screen creatures who would quickly become stars.⁴ The growing division, then, between mainstream films and *le cinéma-d'à-coté* was fuelled by the entertainment priorities of capitalism—a capitalism that became more Americanized in 1927 with the coming of sound.

Sound widened the gap between commercial and artistic cinema. With a few exceptions, story-telling moved from narration to dialogue. Dialogue in turn increased the feeling of psychological verisimilitude and of character identification. Words began to dominate over images, psychology over art; and yet, the more films said, the less they could imply. Denotation—a paraphrasable story—took precedence over connotation—the visual creation of poetic space.

In this way, artistic cinema, first-person cinema—this *cinéma-d'à-coté*—got *demoted* to a space that as early as the 1930s was called the *avant-garde*.⁵ But it wasn't *ahead* of anything. It was doing something different. In France this different practice had been a part of the evolving mainstream cinema from the very first. Known vaguely as Impressionism, it had passionate theorists to defend it. Jean Epstein and Germaine Dulac both wrote about film theory—about a cinema that owed as much to nineteenth-century painting as it did to novels.

This is the theory that, according to Robert Ray, has been lost to film studies.⁶ Ray cites King Vidor—himself somewhat a lost filmmaker: “In the history of films, every great moment that shines is a silent one.”⁷ Throughout his work, Robert Ray's most cited theoretical article is “The Third Meaning,” by Roland Barthes.⁸ By arresting narrative flow and examining an individual image, not only can one make different discoveries than one could within the movement of a scene, but one can also discuss with full seriousness isolated images from a wide variety of films—including films that, for the most part, Film Studies has ignored.⁹

Work on the connotative power of the image and on the theories that celebrated it has also been undertaken recently by another American scholar, Rachel Moore. She cites Bela Balázs: “It is the expressive movement, the gesture, that is the aboriginal mother-tongue of the human race.”¹⁰ Moore herself explains:

Balázs's theory operates by opposing language to gesture; thus, the less linguistically complex a society, the more rich its gestures.¹¹

Like Ray, Moore is concerned throughout her study with resuscitating this alternative theory (including the work of Vachel Lindsay)—the same theory Germaine Dulac is championing in her opening epigraph of this essay: “the future belongs to the film that cannot be told.”

Writing at the time of a moral reclamation of narrative cinema, André Bazin is perhaps responsible for deflecting film away from these theories of the image, paving the way for discussions of film as text. Like Siegfried Kracauer, scarred by the experience of the Second World War, Bazin saw the verisimilitude of the cinematographic image as a potential “redemp-

tion” of physical reality itself. By preferring filmmakers who put their faith in reality over those who put their faith in the image, Bazin was able to declare in the early 1950s that

The film-maker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, at last, the equal of the novelist.¹²

Although Bazin celebrated the moral ambiguities of the long take in Welles and Wyler, the connotative ambiguities of the photographic image—its third meaning, its “obtuse” meaning—were shunted to one side.

These lost theories of the image are beginning to shuttle forward again. Indeed—perhaps surprisingly—a recurring lamentation in Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* concerns film’s failure to live up to the promise of nineteenth-century painting.¹³ The cinema has failed to realize its early potential for creativity and social attention. It has failed consistently to evolve into what at the outset in France was hailed as *le septième art*.

Meanwhile

Fringe films are id-based. They address, liberated from the moderating influence of narrative, our purest sense of impulse—the way we see. To treat these films as marginal is to marginalize some integral part of ourselves.

—Atom Egoyan (1997)¹⁴

The conference “Blowing the Trumpets to the Tulips” examined the state of the cinematic avant-garde in the twenty-first century. Less historical than polemical, less ruminative than practical, the conference offered many excellent presentations of current work within this cinematic practice that still remains without a name.

Back in the 1970s, Bruce Elder talked about Innovational Cinema; and in the 1980s, for a while Mike Hoolboom simply referred to art films as he referred to filmers. Subsequently, when he mentioned the avant-garde he would cross it out, calligraphically registering through the deleted phonemes that “avant-garde” wasn’t the correct term to use.

Bored with this typographical trope, however, Hoolboom now refers to fringe films—in some ways an even more unsatisfactory moniker because, in comparison with the massive Hollywood entertainment machine, all other films exist on the fringe. They are all part of *le cinéma d’à côté*. But if narrative cinema is a social cinema, even that cinema which exists on the fringe, it is still an ego-based cinema, dealing with characters and stories. Experimental Cinema, on the other hand—the avant-garde, the

fringe of the fringe—is, as Egoyan has suggested, an id-based cinema—delving deep into our unconscious potential for apprehending both ourselves and the world.

Fringe film at its most probing embraces that lost tradition of the cinema that puts its faith as much in the image as in the story. Those of us who have had access to the cinemathèques of Europe might have experienced the power of Dimitri Kirsanoff's *Ménilmontant* (1925), featuring the radiantly beautiful Nadia Sibiriskaïa, whose radiance is probably better known (if at all) through Jean Renoir's *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936). There are also the films of Jean Epstein—*La Chute de la maison Usher* (1928); and of Germaine Dulac—*La souriante Madame Beudet* (1923), *La Coquille et le clergyman* (1928). But even the insistently narrative epics of Abel Gance—*La Roue* (1923), *Napoléon* (1923-27)—were “experimental” at that time.

Only when this concern with innovation, this personalized inflection of narrative, was pushed to one side did filmmakers begin to think of themselves as an avant-garde. It was, in fact, a *rear guard* action. They began to constitute a specialized club, at times an actual scene, establishing its own discourse and “underground” institutions—in North America often working within university departments. But as Fred Camper has lamented, this institutionalization took away the movement's innovative edge. “By the start of the institutional period,” he contends,

the fundamental techniques and values of avant-garde filmmaking have already been established, and what once was a movement now becomes a genre.¹⁵

This is as it should be. In Canada, the third generation of Canadian experimental filmmakers are doing other things. As Janine Marchessault has explained:

If modernism was characterized by the drive towards origin and purity, then the post-modernist practices of a new generation of filmmakers emphasize heterogeneity of materials: a reconciliation of forms at once profoundly cynical and politically hopeful.

Marchessault goes on to suggest that the films of this generation “take on the difficult task of making sense through the fragment” and she concludes:

The struggle to create meaning out of chaos, to express a different conception of history and experience is one that, in Canada, continues to be strongly inspired by our documentary tradition.¹⁶

This emphasis on documentary so readily apparent in Escarpment School filmmakers such as Rick Hancox, Richard Kerr, and Phil Hoffman is also endorsed by Michael Dorland:

I entertain the thesis that “avant-garde” in Canada is an instance of mis-
prision and that the notion of experimental documentary may prove more
productive in a Canadian context.¹⁷

Whatever we call it, this practice keeps alive a concern for the image and for personal expression—for the first-person attention to the exploration of self within an ever-changing world.

This ever-changing world requires some attention. Talking to one another in a recent issue of *Brick*, Darren Wershler-Henry, an editor, suggested to Christian Bök, a writer, that “in a society with no center, there are no edges, so there’s nothing to be ‘avant’ of.”¹⁸ And yet, at the Kingston conference, again and again the different presenters spoke about their work in terms of a protest against the system of late capitalism. Some, like the Toronto videographer Richard Fung, who has been active within the international Marxist movement, now feels disenfranchised; while others, like New Yorker Abigail Child, simply presented her work as tilting against the system, as a “twirking of thought”—less making it new, following Ezra Pound’s declaration from the heyday of modernism, than of making it “fucked up.”

This desire to challenge the easy assumptions of spectators also dates back to the early days of cinema, at least as far back as René Clair’s *Entr’Acte* (1924). It was confirmed by the Dali/Buñuel productions *Un Chien andalou* (1928) and *L’Âge d’or* (1930) and by the furore these films created. These screenings did indeed declare the desire of these artists to *épater le bourgeois*, thereby valorizing the sense of a truly revolutionary filmmaking activity. But even then, the desire was not uniform.

Within the avant-garde, there has always been an oscillation between culture and politics. During the formative years, there was an uneasy association between surrealism and communism—with poets like Paul Éluard attempting to hold the two together while others like André Breton were convinced they must be kept apart. These tensions surfaced again in the 1970s, at least in seminar situations, with theorists like Noël Burch and Annette Michelson sometimes claiming that the films of Michael Snow (say) were the aesthetic equivalent of revolutionary activity.¹⁹

This claim has always struck me as specious. It is also potentially damaging—both for deliberately contestational works and, indeed, for actual revolutionary activity. Only in the early days of the Soviet Union (and to a lesser extent in Castro’s Cuba) could artists feel that their cultural work

was going hand-in-hand with the desire to create a new social order. In the Soviet Union, however, that feeling was soon crushed by Stalinism—by the defeat of the communist ideal by a totalitarian bureaucracy, proving to many radicals that that God had failed.²⁰

Back to the Future

Imagine an eye unruléd by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colours are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of “Green”? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of colour. Imagine a world before the “beginning was the word.”
—Stan Brakhage (1963)²¹

Throughout its wonderful history, incontestably, the cinematic avant-garde, whether a true avant-garde with a social agenda (as with Vertov) or simply a more personal cinema (as with Brakhage), this *cinéma d'à coté*—these fringe films—have had to do with vision. If, indeed, there is a “revolutionary” potential within this parallel cinema, the revolution would entail the renewal of perception and a modification of consciousness. At its most refined, this project acquires a metaphysical dimension.

As the citation from Brakhage demonstrates and as early French theory declaims, the impulse behind this cinema involves a liberation from language. Brakhage asks us to imagine a state of consciousness where perception is not shackled by the confinement of words. And the latest work of Bruce Elder invites us, arguably, into spaces of the inexpressible, where language is inadequate for our experience of his films. But this artistic practice, wonderful though it be, is also not new. It parallels the aesthetic ideal put forward over a century ago by the Victorian art critic, Walter Pater: “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.”²² All great art invokes the ineffable.

My case not against the avant-garde but against the discourse that has often subtended it is that such an aspiration is arguably more spiritual than political. We do need art works that can empower especially young spectators to discover imaginative alternatives to present-day complacencies; but if the impulse is still to *épater le bourgeois*, whose films nowadays are more likely to shock—those of Bruce Elder or of Harmony Korine?

Although in the past some avant-gardists felt they were battling against narrative, we now recognize that narrative films are not the enemy. All cultures require narratives to create solidarity. We need poetry, yes; but we also need stories. How those stories work and what purpose they serve is what must be examined. Robert Bresson's *Mouchette* (1967) serves a different purpose than does Steven Spielberg's *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Ditto for *Atanarjuat* (2001) and *Jurassic Park* (1993).

To refine our distinctions across the whole range of cinema is what still needs to be done—a range that must create a special place for the historical avant-garde and for later experimental practices. While struggling “to make it new” or more humbly, simply “to fuck it up,” we have to realize that middle-class society increasingly absorbs the innovations of its past. No modest innovator herself, Gertrude Stein put it neatly:

No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who are also creating their own time refuse to accept. And they refuse to accept it for a very simple reason and that is that they do not have to accept it for any reason....

For a very long time everybody refuses and then almost without a pause almost everyone accepts.²³

Experimental filmmakers will continue doing what experimental filmmakers do—exploring themselves, their medium, and their world. Academics, on the other hand, must create a larger space in their curriculum to explore these explorations. If Film Studies isn't going to slide completely into Cultural Studies, it needs to develop a sense of history that encompasses the full range of cinematic achievement. It needs to celebrate not only the poetic achievements of the highly personalized avant-garde, but also to rediscover that lost theory and the films that comprise it celebrated by Robert Ray and Rachel Moore. When we are burdened with obligatory introductory courses in Film Studies, why not show a film by the Lumières followed with one by David Rimmer? Why not follow a film by Georges Méliès with one by Al Razutis? Let us free Film Studies from its dependence on sequence and upon the hegemonic Hollywood machine. Let's fuck it up! Let's make it new!

Still talking about the challenges of experimental work, speaking as the current editor of Coach House Press, Darren Wershler-Henry suggests to Christian Bök that

the most important radical gestures that an artist makes have to do with reinventing the social—perpetuating a free and vigorous exchange of ideas, information and access to the means of publication.²⁴

Robert Ray has suggested that the “avant-garde is a source of ‘improper questions,’ new concepts that enable us to jump tracks worn out from overuse.”²⁵ Experimental work is only experimental insofar as it provides access to new material that entails a challenge to consciousness. It can create in spectators a wonderful sense of *eunoia*—the feeling of beautiful thinking.²⁶ Indeed, if enough people were truly affected by the quality of such work, they might then, indeed, actually start a revolution—but a revolution in the way we think of cinema, a revolution of consciousness.

Notes

- 1 *Godard on Godard*, trans. and commentary Tom Milne (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 179.
- 2 Germaine Dulac, “From ‘Visual and Anti-Visual Films,’” *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York University Press, 1978), 34.
- 3 *Godard on Godard*, 235.
- 4 Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Grove Press, 1961).
- 5 See Germaine Dulac, “The Avant-Garde Cinema” (1932), *The Avant-Garde Film*, 43-48.
- 6 Robert B. Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and other Mysteries in Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
- 7 Ray, 23.
- 8 Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning: research notes on some Eisenstein stills,” *Image, Music, Text, trans. and selection Stephen Heath* (London: A Fontana Paperback, 1977), 52-68.
- 9 See Robert B. Ray, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 10 Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 41-42.
- 11 Moore, 63.
- 12 André Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” *What is Cinema?*, trans. and selection Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 40.
- 13 See especially, Chapter 3(a) “The Currency of the Absolute,” *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1994).
- 14 Atom Egoyan, “Forward,” *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada*, ed. Mike Hoolboom (Toronto: A Pages Book for Gutter Press, 1997), 1.
- 15 “The End of Avant-Garde Film,” *Millennium Film Journal* 16, no. 17 (Fall/Winter 1986/87), 120-121.
- 16 Katherine Elder, *International Experimental Film Congress*, eds. Catherine Jonasson et al. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989), 115.
- 17 *International Experimental Film Congress*, 33.
- 18 “Christian Bök and Darren Wershler Henry: An Interview,” *Brick—a literary journal* 69 (Spring 2002), 109.
- 19 Noël Burch, during the seminars held at the Slade School of Speech and Drama in London, England, 1974; Annette Michelson at an early meeting of The Society for Film Studies at New York University, 1975.
- 20 Arthur Koestler et al., *The God That Failed* (London: Hamilton, 1950).
- 21 Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, *Film Culture* 30 (1963).
- 22 Walter Pater, “The School of Giorgione,” *Fortnightly Review* (October 1877), reprinted in *Walter Pater: Selected Works*, ed. Richard Aldington (London: William Heinemann, 1948), 271.
- 23 Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation,” *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: The Modern Library, 1962), 514-515.
- 24 *Brick*, 112.
- 25 *How a Film Theory Got Lost*, 56.
- 26 See Christian Bök, *Eunoia* (Toronto: Coach House, 2001)