

Knigh't's Moves

Peter Wollen

“Experimental film,” “Pure Film,” “Underground film,” “Co-op film,” “Avant-garde film,” “Counter-cinema”... How distant all these terms seem from the vantage point of today, how dated, how nostalgic, how difficult to explain. I am afraid that, to make sense of them, I shall have to be shamelessly autobiographical, to go back over forty years or more in order to puzzle out the complex and confusing ways in which the theory and practice of avant-garde cinema developed and changed. “Memory Lane” is always a treacherous path to follow, but it would be pointless to pretend that I was somehow an outsider looking back dispassionately on the intricate debates that flourished in the world of experimental film, during the 1970s in particular. Of course, these debates did not spring up from nowhere. The form they took was determined by a long previous history, going back many decades, and also by expectations of the future—this was a time in which I (and others) wrote drafts of guidelines for possible futures under the pretext of theorizing contemporary film practice, looking for alternative ways of film-making.

It is futile—probably impossible—to try and define all the distinctions we might like to make between categories such as “experimental film,” “avant-garde film,” “underground film,” “co-op film,” “counter-cinema” (my very own contribution) and so on. The history of experimental film is broken and diverse—rather, as in Victor Shklovsky’s image, it proceeded by knight’s moves, going forward much of the time but always obliquely, sometimes aggressive, sometimes defensive, according to a strategy which was always difficult to define and second guess. There are, however, some constants. Experimental film did not develop in an artistic vacuum; as well as its contrasts and connections with the commercial cinema, experimental film also had connections and contrasts with the other arts—painting, of course (itself a visual art), as well as music (another time-based art), and even poetry, particularly “imagist poetry,” but also “typographic poetry.” In particular, the influence of painting and music often pushed experimental film towards animation as a working method and abstraction as a goal—Eggeling, Richter, Fischinger, MacLaren, the Whitney brothers, and many, many others.

Experimental film has had a long history, spanning the entire twentieth century. At the very beginning of the cinema, every film was “experimental” in a sense, and it was not until the feature film had fully crystallized that the concept of “experimental film” began to take on a specific mean-

ing of its own. Basically, the term began to be applied to all those films—and there were not very many of them—that differed in fundamental ways from the majority of films made as commercial ventures, as commodities. Right from the start, experimental films had a limited audience, an audience of aesthetes, intellectuals, and radicals, a dedicated minority who were intrigued, even moved or thrilled, by the new, the unconventional, the difficult, the eccentric, the idiosyncratic. From the start, experimental films had one foot firmly placed in the art world (including the music world and the poetry world) and one foot, a little sheepishly, venturing into the film world, the world of the entertainment business. Experimental film-makers were the oddballs, the innovators, the aesthetes, the explorers—marginalized but undeterred.

Today we have “Independent Films,” denizens of a kind of junior league of commercial cinema, designed for a more sophisticated and discerning audience than the blockbusters and star vehicles that dominate the market. But experimental films had quite different ambitions—they were designed to be demanding, difficult, even esoteric. From the very beginning the film-makers were camp-followers of avant-garde art, aiming to integrate technology with aesthetics, to shake off the derogatory implications of the machine and insist that film-making could be as personal and idiosyncratic as music or poetry. From very early on avant-garde film was tied to the art world—Eggeling’s abstract *Diagonal Symphony*; Richter’s *Rhythmus 21*; Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique*; Man Ray’s *Le Retour à la Raison*, shown at the dadaist “Evening of the Bearded Heart”; Duchamp’s *Anémic Cinéma*; Buñuel’s surrealist *Un Chien andalou*, a film itself influenced by René Clair’s dadaist *Entr’Acte*... Buñuel’s film was thus connected to the performance world, through *Entr’Acte*, and to surrealism, through his admiration for Benjamin Peret. In the 1960s the connection of experimental film with the art world became even stronger, as artists like Andy Warhol or Michael Snow became film-makers, returning, in many ways, to the simplicity and the fascination with technique that characterized the very first films. The return to the past is typical of many experimental film-makers of the ’60s and ’70s. Malcolm Legrice’s *After Lumière* remakes Lumière’s own *L’Arroseur Arrosé*. Warhol’s *Kiss* recapitulates, whether consciously or unconsciously, Edison’s *May Irwin Kiss* of 1896. In 1968 Ken Jacobs made his *Tom, Tom, The Piper’s Son*, a re-filming off the screen of Billy Bitzer’s 1905 film of the nursery rhyme, re-filming as the camera wanders around the on-screen image, zooming in on details, making a film of a film, which Jacobs describes as “a dream within a dream.” Looking back on it, I think that this is also true of *Penthesilea*, the feature-length film I made with Laura Mulvey in 1974, which not only incorporates documentary

footage of a suffragette pageant, but is constructed by simply splicing together whole rolls of film, as if transported back into the period of so-called “primitive cinema,” before the invention of continuity editing. Experimental film, it seems, is constantly re-visiting its past, not only the distant past of Muybridge or Lumière, but also the more recent past. The film-makers of today draw on the work of their predecessors, the film-makers of yesterday.

At the same time, the gravitational pull of the film industry can never be entirely discounted. After all, the Disney studio towered over the world of animation, as it still does today, and, for a number of film-makers, making experimental films was a prelude to entering the industry. I am thinking, for instance, of René Clair, and also of Elia Kazan, who was one of the two actors in Ralph Steiner’s *Pie in The Sky*. Similarly, many feature films have managed to find their way into the avant-garde canon —Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, Pabst’s *Secret of A Soul*, Vertov’s *Man With A Movie Camera*, Brecht and Dudow’s *Kuhle Wampe*, Buñuel and Dali’s *L’Âge D’Or*, Cocteau’s *Blood of A Poet*, and so on. There is even a case to be made for *Hard Day’s Night*, inspired by Spike Milligan’s absurdist *Running Jumping and Standing Still Film*, or for the films of European art directors of the 1960s—Godard, of course, but also Rivette, Rouch, Straub-Huillet, Chantal Akerman, and several others. In the 1970s there were many film-makers who set out to make experimental features—the films of Yvonne Rainer, for instance, or those of Jon Jost, or even *Penthesilea* and *Riddles of the Sphinx*, which I co-wrote and co-directed with Laura Mulvey.

Another neighbour of experimental film has always been the documentary—especially the “city film,” beginning with Sheeler and Strand’s *Manhatta* and Ruttman’s *Berlin, Symphony of A City* in the 1920s, and then continuing with Vigo’s *A Propos de Nice* and Ralph Steiner’s *The City*, which was made in 1939. In England, John Grierson worked with Alberto Cavalcanti, himself the maker a classic avant-garde documentary of the 1920s, *Rien Que Les Heures*, producing what we might well call experimental documentaries, such as *Night Train*, with its voice-over poem, written by W.H. Auden, and working in counterpoint to the rhythm of the film’s montage, its editing, as well as the rhythm of the pistons which drive the train. In his polemical book, *The Struggle for Film*, written in the late 1930s, Hans Richter, best known as an abstract film-maker, made the case for experimental documentary on both aesthetic and political grounds. For Richter, documentary was the true vocation of the cinema, as revealed by the first screenings of the Lumière brothers’ films of the train entering the station, the workers leaving the factory.

After the war, the debates on documentary were thrown into confusion by the emergence of a self-confident group of film-makers who were perceived by outsiders as “underground film-makers.” These filmmakers, however, saw themselves as an avant-garde in the (by now) classical sense of the term, especially those whose connections were largely with the art world, which also exerted a strong gravitational pull. Indeed the “happenings” boom had placed performance right in the vanguard of the art world itself. Moreover, as David James has pointed out,¹ poetry also exerted a significant influence on the film world. Maya Deren, for example, claimed that her films, and those of others, were poetic and lyrical in their construction, rather than dramatic and narrative-driven. Deren’s own terminology distinguishes the “vertical” and the “horizontal,”² or, as we might put it today, the “metaphorical” and the “metonymic.” In 1953, at the Cinema 16 symposium on “Poetry and the Film,” Parker Tyler (himself a poet) argued that there was a division between short films which worked with “a surrealist poetry of the pure image,” and longer films which accepted the responsibility of story-telling and sought to develop a cinema of “poetry as a visual-verbal medium.”³

It is in this context that Stan Brakhage, many years later, could say that “Like Jean Cocteau, I was a poet who also made films.”⁴ What becomes clear from all these disparate connections is that film is inevitably multifaceted—film and visual art, film and music, film and document, film and poetry—and that its potential can be developed in many different ways. Put simply, there can be no distinct ontology of film, only a range of possibilities. Perhaps Artaud was right when he suggested that at one end of the scale there was the commercial film, in which the world was broken down into units (shots) which were then combined into a sequence through continuity editing, and, at the other end, there was the documentary, which—as he described it—depended on capturing the unpredictable, the dynamic and still developing.⁵ In fact, experimental film became divided between the carefully planned and controlled forms of “structural film” and the unplanned and uncontrolled forms of films, which were, in effect, home movies, a sub-genre of the documentary, in which the object being documented might be the effect of light as refracted through a translucent ashtray on the Governor of Colorado’s desk.

I entered these debates in the 1970s, shortly before I first began to make films myself, in partnership with Laura Mulvey. The articles I wrote then were designed to justify the feature film format as a viable way of making an experimental film with a political argument. In fact, we made two feature-length films: the first—*Penthesilea*—made in Evanston, Illinois in 1974, and the second—*Riddles of the Sphinx*—made in London, England in 1977. Both *Penthesilea* and *Riddles of the Sphinx* were struc-

tured in segments without any continuity editing. The segments were rather like long chapters and were designed both to tell a story, schematically at least, and to raise a number of political issues, particularly feminist issues. Had they been conventional films they would probably have fallen into the category of melodrama—a grandiose film of *Penthesilea*, for instance, was an unfinished project of Leni Riefenstahl's and Laura Mulvey has observed that, made in another way, *Riddles of the Sphinx* could have been something like a Douglas Sirk melodrama, even a “tear-jerker” or “weepie.”⁶ The differences are budgetary, of course, but also stylistic, differences between one form of story-telling, well-polished and almost second nature, and another, consciously contrived and artificial.

Essentially they were experimental films, part of a series of films made in the 1970s—Chantal Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974) or *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Other significant films were Yvonne Rainer's *Lives of Performers* (1972) and *Film About a Woman Who...* (1974), as well as the Berwick Street Collective's *Night-cleaners* (1975) and Jackie Raynal's *Deux Fois* (1976). These were the key films in what we might now think of as the avant-garde feminist breakthrough. Soon afterwards came Yvonne Rainer's *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (1979), a meditation on anarchism set both in America and Germany yet shot mainly in London. In this film, as in many of Rainer's films, friends of the director play crucial roles—for example, Annette Michelson plays the part of a patient, whose psychoanalyst at times refers to her on-screen as “Annette.” At other times, he is replaced by a female therapist and eventually by Chad Wollen, then nine years old, who merely barks like a dog!

It was during this same period that Laura Mulvey's “Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious” (1973) was published, followed by “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975)—now a classic—and “Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde” (1978), as well as my own “Godard and Counter-Cinema: Vent d'Est” (1972), “The Two Avant-Gardes” (1975), and “‘Ontology’ and ‘Materialism’ in Film” (1976). Six years later I wrote another polemical text, “Semiotic Counter-Strategies: Retrospect” (1982), which concluded as follows:

I want to return again to my early invocation of the names of Brecht and Breton, two emblematic figures in the history of the avant-garde. Brecht and Breton suggest two very different avenues for art, but I think that each insisted on things that are necessary--Brecht on understanding and explanation, Breton on freedom and the power of the unconscious. Each also had a vivid interest in popular art and entertainment and incorporated elements from it into their own work. It is also true to say that they both gave

equal weight to form and content, to aesthetics and politics. Here is a quote from Breton, to the Paris Congress of Writers in 1935: 'In art we rise up against any regressive conception that tends to oppose content to form, in order to sacrifice the latter to the former.' And a quote from Brecht: 'Even an ivory tower is a better place to sit in nowadays than a Hollywood villa.'⁷

To put these texts in their proper perspective it is important to recapitulate the film-making context in which they were written. At the beginning of the 1970s a series of significant films were made, largely within the structural or structural/materialist tradition. In 1970 came Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, Ernie Gehr's *Institutional Quality*, George Landow's *Remedial Reading Comprehension*, Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*, and, in England, Malcolm LeGrice's *Berlin Horse*. The next year there was a group of much longer, very different films, including Brakhage's documentary of an autopsy, *The Act Of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, Michael Snow's extended post-structural film, *La Région Centrale*, and Frampton's *Hapax Legomena*, which came out in segments through 1971 and 1972. 1973 brought Peter Gidal's structural-materialist classic, *Room Film*, and Anthony McCall's installation film, *Line Describing A Cone*, while 1974 brought Michael Snow's very long work, "*Rameau's Nephew*" by Diderot (*Thanks to Dennis Young*) by Wilma Shoen.

Riddles of the Sphinx was much more systematic in its organization. It consists of seven sections, arranged in a symmetrical pattern, "ABCD-CBA," with the central section consisting of thirteen "chapters," each in the form of a 360 degree pan, the shortest about two minutes, the longest about ten. I saw the film again recently, when it was being screened in Vancouver, and I was struck by the way in which the pans perform two separate functions, formal and discursive. Each pan has its own tempo as it moves inexorably onward, without any perceptible change of speed, while new elements are constantly being revealed and their predecessors lost, rather like the continuous unrolling and re-rolling of a scroll. Within the circular space created by the rotation of the camera, objects, characters, and events pass by without pause or interruption. The space is both flattened, pressing inwards, in interiors, and expanded, pushing outwards, in exteriors. The characters seem to be moving against the background of a frieze, only circular like a nineteenth-century panorama.

These effects were by-products of the choice and choreography of the film's camera movements, which, as in *Zorns Lemma*, combined serial units into a puzzle to be solved. At the same time, each pan acts discursively as a link between narrative events. This sounds like a very formalist description, but formalism was indeed crucial to the way the film was originally planned and envisaged. A film like *Riddles of the Sphinx* is

designed to separate form from content, so that the spectator is simultaneously aware of each. Indeed, perhaps the most important riddle proposed by the film is that of how to reconcile form and content, and, if they cannot be reconciled, how to interpret that failure of reconciliation—one which, by all the evidence, must have been intended. In the case of *Riddles of the Sphinx* form and content deliberately remain independent, unreconciled. Neither is dispensable but neither of them is dominant either. Form and content are simply on different tracks. At the time, we thought of this strategy as a kind of Brechtian device, a way of creating what Brecht called “distantiation,” forcing the viewer to step out of the story, out of any kind of identification, and to look at events as if from a distance, seeing them as issues to be dealt with intellectually, thought through, or argued out.

This Brechtian model was certainly in our mind, but I don’t think it was exactly what we wanted to achieve. A closer model was that provided by Victor Shklovsky, the Russian literary theorist, who developed his own theory of estrangement—what is often translated as “laying bare (or defamiliarizing) the device.” The “device” in this context refers to the particular stylistic and formal means that a writer uses in order to tell a story. In traditional story-telling the style and the technique are simply means to an end, to the author’s success in captivating the reader and carrying her (or him) through to the end, to the conclusion or “pay-off,” without any disturbance or interruption. Shklovsky argued that when the stylistic or technical device was laid bare, it changed the reader’s (or viewer’s) whole relationship with the work, which came to be seen as something artificial rather than something natural. In Shklovsky’s phraseology, the device can be seen as unmotivated, unrelated to the story-line, formally independent, like a 360 degree pan that doesn’t follow the character or cut from one point of interest and involvement to another, so that “we cannot provide a satisfactory realistic reason for its presence.”⁸

This is because, as commentators on Shklovsky have put it, the device (the series of 360 degree pans) exists simply to be noticed by the reader (or viewer). If we are made more aware of the technique than of its narrative function, it is “revealed” or “laid bare,” seen as artificial, rather than natural. Both *Penthesilea* and *Riddles of the Sphinx* are based upon the de-naturalization of technique. If technique is not revealed or foregrounded, the “artistic devices” used tend to be “automatized,” taken for granted, so that the viewer remains unaware of the camerawork or the editing strategies as such. Shklovsky was interested in literary forms, such as the fable, which constantly remind us that we are reading a fiction and that we cannot mistake it for reality. This is somewhat different from Brecht’s intention, which was to make us look at the characters and their

actions objectively rather than identifying with them subjectively. Shklovsky's idea was that we should be as aware of aesthetic and technical qualities as we are of the story or the drama of the characters. We are deliberately made aware that the film has been constructed. In this sense, films like *Penthesilea* and *Riddles of the Sphinx* were intended to function somewhat like poetic fictions, albeit fictions that pose questions.

There were two significant cinematic sources for these films. First, the segmentation and the chapter structure owed a debt to Chantal Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle*, which basically tells four separate stories, involving one central character, which the viewer is invited to compare with one other. Second, it also owes a debt to Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*, another film that has a chapter structure—explicitly numbered—so that instead of getting a continuous story we are given a series of disjunct tableaux. Again we are being asked to make our own connections, to provide our own interpretation, once it has been made clear that this narrative work is not going to be done for us, implicitly or explicitly, by the film-maker—in this case Godard, who consistently preferred questions to answers. Yvonne Rainer too credits Godard as a source for an element of one of her films,⁹ although she gives Martha Graham and Virginia Woolf equal credit. Her observation that “Annette Michelson's non-naturalistic performance (in *Journeys from Berlin*) is totally appropriate”¹⁰ suggests a hint of Brechtianism too, although she also describes the text of the film as “obviously a surreal kind of recitation,”¹¹ thereby introducing André Breton too.

My 1972 essay on Godard and counter-cinema welcomed his break with the conventions of mainstream cinema, particularly his rejection of conventional narrative structures. For instance, he repeatedly questioned the process of film-making within the film itself, introducing digressions and interpolations that fractured the customary coherence of the narrative, separating the content of the sound-track from the content of the image-track and foregrounding the process of film-making within the film itself, often through the device of showing a film within the film, making the mechanics of film-making visible within the film itself, separating voices from characters or using Brechtian estrangement effects. These devices made new demands on the spectator, who was compelled to puzzle out the meaning of the film rather than receive it unreflectively. In a variety of ways, the spectator was encouraged to think about the film while watching it, to make a conscious effort of interpretation. Godard used many of the devices used by avant-garde or “underground” film-makers, but his purpose was quite different. When he showed scratched film in *Vent d'Est*, it was intended as a sign of negation, of crossing out, whereas in other films “noise” or scratching was foregrounded as an aesthetic gesture.

In *Journeys from Berlin*, as in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, we are reminded that we are viewing a fictional world and must not mistake it directly for reality, but instead try to understand how it relates to reality. At the same time, the aesthetic dimension of the work is foregrounded, rather than its narrative function. The narrative, as in a fable, is simply there to provide a set of examples, situations that the viewer is being asked to interpret, while simultaneously enjoying the formal and aesthetic qualities of the work. In this sense, the idea of counter-cinema is directed not so much against Hollywood films, which in fact often do “lay bare the device” — for example, Hitchcock’s *Rope* or a Busby Berkeley musical — as against André Bazin’s call for “realism” in the cinema, for the construction of an alternative world as real as the one that we are living in! The question Bazin asked himself was “What is cinema”? The truth is that the infrastructure of film-making — lighting, camerawork, editing, and so on — exists in the real world, unlike the characters or the story. One of the main aims of counter-cinema was to challenge the assumption of on-screen realism by drawing attention to these off-screen mechanics, materials, and processes of film, just as Brecht, working in the theatre, had drawn attention to the reality of the actor’s stance or gestures.

In fact, a fascination with the mechanics of film, its material structures, and formal devices goes back to the early years of film. Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera* was made in the late 1920s, but it is already a film in which the camera is star, the hero of the film, and in which we see the processes of photography and editing as well as the projection of the film itself — a film within a film. The camera is also animated, so that it can walk on its three tripod legs like a self-willed robotic creature. *Man With a Movie Camera* has often been hailed as a direct precursor of the self-referentiality and foregrounding of technology which became a major feature of avant-garde film-making, in films such as Michael Snow’s *Wavelength*, notoriously constructed around a single forty-five-minute zoom from one end of a New York loft to another. While there are some narrative incidents during the zoom — even a death — the zoom continues inexorably, so that soon the body left lying on the floor is no longer visible.

Wavelength was made in 1967. Interviewed slightly more than twenty years later, Michael Snow was quite explicit about his wish to lay bare the device. In his own words, “I knew I wanted to expand something — a zoom — that normally happens fast, and to allow myself or the spectator to be sort of inside it for a long period. You’d get to know this device which normally just gets you from one space to another. I started to think about the so-called film vocabulary before I made *Wavelength* — with *Eye and Ear Control*. You know, what *are* all these devices and how can you get to see them, instead of just using them? So that was part of it.”¹²

Shklovsky would have been delighted. He actually worked in a film studio, which he describes in his book *The Third Factory*, where he writes about the “cuttings” (the individual shots, the minimal units of film) that “are kept in the canvas-covered bins in the cutting room.”¹³ He muses, “I would like to film in a different way—to achieve a different rhythm. I love long strips of life. Give the actors a chance to show their stuff. Less tea, less cutting. All we can do is try.”¹⁴

Another significant film of this period was Anthony MacCall’s *Line Describing A Cone*, made in New York in 1973 and recently revived at the Whitney Museum. In many ways, it is a very simple film. There is a projector and a screen. On the celluloid there is a single point of light which is extended over twenty minutes, frame by frame, to become the circumference of a complete circle. As a result, the beam of light running from projector to screen becomes the surface of a cone that seems strangely solid and palpable, a kind of time sculpture, or as MacCall has called it, a kind of kinetic light sculpture, until you try to touch it and your fingers pass clean through. To improve the effect MacCall used to recommend the audience to smoke, but now that is no longer feasible. When I projected the film in a class, we used chalk-dust. At the Whitney, they created mist. Once again, the viewers’ attention is drawn to process, rather than to image, inviting them to think about the nature of the projected image. In this piece, the projection beam itself is foregrounded rather than the image it projects; its reality is demonstrated. The beam of light, apparently the most insubstantial of objects, becomes visible as if it were a solid figure.

In the summer of that year, August 1976, MacCall attended the Edinburgh International Forum of Avant-Garde Film, which brought together film-makers from many different countries and with many different aesthetic (and political) positions, both from the New York avant-garde and from the post-Godardian counter-cinema. As a result of the provocative Edinburgh debates, MacCall began to re-think his position as a filmmaker. In 1978, with Andrew Tyndall, a friend who was a journalist, MacCall made *Argument*, a theoretically-oriented essay film, which was closer to the new wave of avant-garde political films being made in America and Europe than to structural film. In 1980 MacCall developed this type of film-making further when he and Tyndall joined Claire Pajaczkowska and Jane Weinstock in making *Sigmund Freud’s Dora*, a filmic dramatization of and commentary on Freud’s text from a feminist point of view. *Dora*, like *Riddles of The Sphinx*, derived from the convergence of feminism, Brechtianism, “Screen” theory, “new narrative,” and the Godardian essay film. It was photographed by Babette Mangolte, who had previously worked with Yvonne Rainer and then with Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*.

A principal source for *Riddles of the Sphinx* was Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, a tripartite film, whose title refers explicitly to mathematical set theory. It begins with a recitation of the eighteenth-century Bay State Primer's antique twenty-four letter alphabet, followed by a series of twenty-four images, each repeated cyclically. Every image stands in for a letter of the alphabet and is on screen for just one second at a time—that is to say, technically, for twenty four frames of films matching the twenty-four letters of the alphabet. Each time the images are recycled—images of breakers at sea or of eggs cooking or of painting a wall—one of them is dropped, until eventually none are left. Then, in the third sequence, human figures with a dog are seen crossing a snow-covered field, a sequence ending as the white of the snow merges with the white of the end leader, the film's own closing frames. According to Frampton, "The film had its beginnings in pre-occupation with tension between graphic & plastic / flat vs. illusionistic elements in same space. The basic structure is one of a series of sets of sets, in tribute to Zorn"¹⁵—or, perhaps, one could say, the tension between the flat screen and the perspectival image.

Films like *Zorns Lemma* or *Riddles of the Sphinx*, as well as many others, both take us back to the origins and pre-history of cinema itself, to Muybridge for example, and draw upon a like-minded circle of contemporaries. Already in the 1920s a kind of mutual aid had developed between film-makers. Léger introduced Buñuel to Man Ray, who introduced Léger to Louis Aragon, still then a surrealist. They all attended the screening of *Un Chien andalou*, as did Cocteau, who put Buñuel in touch with the Vicomte de Noailles, who agreed to finance *L'Âge D'Or*, in the same way that he had previously financed Man Ray's film, *Le Mystère du Château de Dé*. Max Ernst and Pierre Prévert appeared in the film, in the scene with the bandits in Catalunya. In making *Un Chien andalou*, Buñuel had already worked for Jean Epstein on *Fall of the House of Usher* and he also looked back to an earlier French avant-garde—the films he mentions specifically are Cavalcanti's *Rien Que Les Heures* and René Clair's *Entr'Acte*. Avant-garde film-makers saw themselves as members of a community, with a common project.

A similar atmosphere prevailed in the 1960s in New York and in the 1970s in London. *Riddles of the Sphinx* was partly shot in Malcolm LeGrice's house—the kitchen scene—and partly in Steve Dwoskin's—the mirror scene. The editing room scene cites Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*. The central character's young daughter—in the high-chair, at day-care, in the grandmother's garden—was actually the camerawoman's daughter. The whole history of the avant-garde is one not just of artistic or aesthetic connections but of social connections too. In fact these social connections are what make a movement possible—whether the surrealist

film movement, or underground film, or structural film, or counter-cinema. Thus, in the late 1920s, when the idea of an alternative cinema really took root in America, those involved were the closely knit group who supported the “Little Cinema” movement, an attempt by exhibitors to create a space for “experimental pictures,” or—a slightly different category—“art pictures,”¹⁶ such as Watson and Webber’s *Fall of the House of Usher*, which premiered at the New York Film Art Guild in 1928. At much the same time, in France, Germaine Dulac’s films were screened through the emergent “ciné-club” movement, and in England, in the 1920s, there was the London Film Society.

Half a century later, Anthology and Millennium in New York and the Other Cinema in London fulfilled much the same role, screening avant-garde features, including the premiere of *Riddles of the Sphinx*. It was in the 1970s that structural and structural/materialist film gradually extended in length and began to give way to the experimental and avant-garde feature film, as exemplified by Yvonne Rainer, by Mulvey-Wollen, and by Chantal Akerman, as well as by Joyce Wieland, Jean-Marie Straub, Daniele Huillet (*History Lessons*, 1972), and the Berwick Street Collective’s *Nightcleaners* (1975). It was in this context that I first wrote about the bifurcation of experimental film between the tradition of the Film-Makers’ Co-op, on the one hand, and the avant-garde feature film, often with a political subtext, on the other. At the beginning of the decade, I was mainly preoccupied by the implications of Jean-Luc Godard’s withdrawal from the usual goals and structures of the film industry, first on his own account and then in collaboration, notably with J.-P. Gorin and Anne-Marie Miéville.

In 1974, when asked which film-makers most interested me, I replied, “Straub, Godard, Joyce Wieland, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton for *Zorns Lemma*, Jackie Raynal for *Deux Fois*.” Then I added, “I’m more interested in Hitchcock than before.”¹⁷ So I would like to end with some observations about Hitchcock. In 1925 Hitchcock began to attend film screenings organized by the London Film Society at the New Gallery Cinema. There he developed connections and interests that stayed with him throughout his career, including an interest in experimental film. Many years later, he was inspired to make *Rope*, a film which shamelessly laid bare the device, through a miraculous series of long takes, running over many minutes. Yet the experimental dimension of *Rope* that moved Hitchcock the most was the machine that controlled the lighting of the giant cyclorama of New York that can be seen through the apartment window. The technician at the console could control the light to suggest the changing time of day. As night fell, the effect of sunlight was gradually diminished and replaced by electric lights as if from windows and

neon signs. As Hitchcock recalled, “By the time the picture went from the setting of the sun in the first reel to the hour of total darkness in the final *dénouement*, the man at the light organ had played a nocturnal Manhattan symphony in light.”¹⁸

I would like to conclude with a final reflection on the work of Viktor Shklovsky. Shklovsky was a literary critic, despite the time he spent working in a film studio, who argued that a literary work always consisted of the sum of its devices. Most authors attempted to conceal the devices, so that the reader was carried through the book without any friction, but Shklovsky championed, as I have noted, those books in which the device was foregrounded, laid bare. Shklovsky was not explicit about the political dimension of the “estrangement” caused by laying bare the device—it was left to Brecht to stress that aspect—but he did insist on its theoretical and critical importance. In 1919 he explained that he “sought a reinterpretation of literature that would stress the importance of purely linguistic elements and artistic devices: sounds and words, structure and style.”¹⁹ He also stressed the role of the framing device—the significance of *Arabian Nights*, for example, in which the individual stories are framed within the story of Scheherazade, and the “threading device,”²⁰ through which a series of separate stories or incidents are linked together through a common protagonist, as occurs in *Riddles of the Sphinx*.

In the world of experimental film and counter-cinema, the language consists of its own, purely filmic, elements and artistic devices—devices such as the zoom, the pan, the projection beam, and so on, as well as more abstract and conceptual devices such as the significance of counting twenty-four frames per second in relation to the twenty-four letters of the Bay State Primer alphabet. However, as Johanna Drucker points out in her fascinating book *The Visible World*,²¹ Shklovsky’s writings did indeed have a considerable effect, not only on literature but also on visual art, particularly through their impact on typography, and especially in the case of avant-garde poetry in which the visual effect of the alphabet and its disposition on the page was as important as its verbal form and content. I am sure that Shklovsky would have appreciated the artistic significance of such technological devices as the 360 degree pan, the zoom, the ten-minute take, and the cone of light, artefacts that, rather than seamlessly hidden, were shamelessly foregrounded by a new generation of filmmakers. I am sure he would have approved of the insistent visibility of the filmic device, the shot as such, as much as he did the visibility of the material and mechanical devices of typography as instruments of poetry.

Notes

- 1 David James, *Allegories of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 29.
- 2 James.
- 3 Parker Tyler, *Underground Film* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995).
- 4 James, 29.
- 5 Antonin Artaud, "The Premature Old Age of the Cinema," *French Film Theory and Criticism, 1907-1939*, Vol. 2, ed. Richard Abeled (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 122-124.
- 6 Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Laura Mulvey," *A Critical Cinema 2* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 343-344.
- 7 André Breton, "Speech to the Congress of Writers," *Manifestos of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 240.
- 8 Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, Chapters 1 and 2: "Art as Device" and "The Relationship between Devices of Plot and Devices of Style" (Elmwood Park, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press), 1990.
- 9 Mitchell Rosenbaum, "Interview with Yvonne Rainer," *The Films of Yvonne Rainer* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 38.
- 10 Rosenbaum, 39.
- 11 Rosenbaum.
- 12 MacDonald, "Interview with Michael Snow," 63.
- 13 Viktor Shklovsky, *Third Factory* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 77.
- 14 Shklovsky, *Third Factory*, 78.
- 15 Hollis Frampton, "Notes on Zorns Lemma," *Screen Writings*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 56.
- 16 Jan Christopher Horak, "The First American Film Avant-Garde," *Lovers of Cinema* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 20, 21.
- 17 Peter Wollen, unpublished interview.
- 18 Alfred Hitchcock, "My Most Exciting Picture," *Hitchcock on Hitchcock* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 277-278.
- 19 Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, Chapters 1 and 2.
- 20 Shklovsky, Chapters 1 and 2.
- 21 Johanna Drucker, *The Visible World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), passim.