

## WHAT'S IN A NAME? — THE AMERICAN AVANT GARDE FILM, OR...

BY JOHN PRUITT

At various times and in various contexts, the American avant-garde film has been known under a wide assortment of names, some of them existing simultaneously — especially in the late 50s and early 60s. Here is a list which cannot pretend to be definitive: “Underground Film,” “Experimental Cinema,” “The New American Cinema,” “Personal Cinema,” “Non-narrative Film,” “Poetical Film,” “Art Movies,” “Independent Film,” “Free Cinema,” “Alternative Film,” and “Abstract Film.”

The philosopher Benedetto Croce once observed that just because an encyclopedia arranges knowledge in alphabetical order, this by no means suggests that the processes of human thought are fundamentally structured on a like principle. Similarly, names are most often a mere convenience for knowing where to look for something and are not necessarily indicative of content or rooted in deep principle. On the contrary, they can be utterly arbitrary and accidental — despite their staying power. Substantive issues can be at stake, yet where art is concerned, it is a small mind that fails to see the true end of disputes over taxonomy — is Chaplin’s *City Lights* a comedy or tragedy? The argument is interesting only in so far as it might reveal formerly hidden characteristics of said work; were one even possible, an ultimate answer wouldn’t by any means change the way we might think. Names stick in ways that invite non-thinking and art compels us to renew our thinking again and again. So you know that Mozart’s *La Clemenza di Tito* is an 18th century *opera seria*. You haven’t said all that much. You have simply taken a particular volume down from your shelf, so to speak. Assuming you really do wish to say something, now the real work begins. And assuming you in fact set to work, you may wind up at the end by re-ordering your shelves. Names are merely a finger pointed in a given direction — for the time being, for this particular critical context, or...

Despite a healthy perspective that refuses to be exercised over name calling, there is something irksome, nevertheless, in every name by which a certain cinematic practice has been known — that movement (if such it can be called) begun by artists like Hans Richter, Germaine Dulac, Luis Bunuel, and Jean Cocteau, continued by Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas, Peter Kubelka, et al. — right up to a younger (and soon to be older) generation of numerous

artists working sometimes locally, sometimes internationally, but by and large working away from commercial movie houses, if not always away from major festival venues, museums, and college campuses. There is reason to be defensive about this state of affairs since each name to some degree not only creates a false category but implies a justification for putting the identified films in their place — usually a minor place at best, when there is much evidence to the contrary that within the avant-garde there are numerous instances of major achievement.

In 1965, Robert Kelly closed a short piece on Brakhage’s *The Art of Vision* with a rhetorical line I have always remembered since first reading it: “It is important to call things by their right name.” For me the problem is that I am unconvinced that the avant-garde film has ever received its true and proper name — or even one that comes close, since each has left me uneasy. Here is a brief catalogue of objections to the most frequently employed names:

(1) “**Underground Film.**” This name has strong socio-political implications and largely recalls the days when the sexual content (i.e. nudity, homosexual themes, etc.) of many films was a great attraction for certain audiences because the old Hollywood production codes and state blue laws hadn’t yet broken down to the extent that mainstream, so-called respectable people had access to works of explicit content. In today’s atmosphere (Jesse Helms notwithstanding) the artist who is so subversive as to fear legal repercussions or social stigma and hence must go “underground” doesn’t really exist. It is by no means certain that there is an underground place to go to anyway: if anything the U.S. Congress seems to have vastly enlarged Robert Mapplethorpe’s and Karen Finley’s reputations — perhaps beyond what they deserved in terms solely based on the worth of their art. In film, there are plenty of small, non-mainstream venues which are utterly respectable (or, if not, will quickly become so) and they have their own establishment.

(2) “**Experimental Cinema.**” Perhaps the least worthy name and the one which is the most blatant put-down. It implies an artistic activity of *mere* experimentation, or of unconscious, non-serious serendipity which will



bear fruit later on (in mainstream culture) once the experimenting stops and real art (i.e. of the carefully crafted species) begins. There is at least one serious Hollywood director and a few begrudging critics who still believe that the avant-garde is a laboratory for technique which then influences and takes hold in the bigger, Hollywood films. This was true perhaps for a short period in the sixties but in terms of meaningful influence on Hollywood, the avant-garde has had practically none to speak of. What people call experiments are the real thing.

(3) “**Personal Cinema.**” A name that clearly means well but it is almost as dangerous as the preceding term, for at face value the name appears to concede that such films may be private, self-indulgent, and confessional — hence they are not really meant to be understood in the first place, or they are merely unvarnished eruptions of subjective feelings which have not yet been crafted into the rigorous forms of effective art. This term also rides roughly over the fact that while many filmmakers in the avant-garde do place a premium on personal expression, others (like Peter Kubelka, Michael Snow) have striven for extreme *impersonality*.

(4) “**The New American Cinema.**” For one thing it isn’t so new anymore; for another, this is a term of the sixties when to be young, bold and new presumably meant everything. But there is a lurking ambiguity as well. At one time “The New American Cinema” could have meant either Bruce Baillie, Bruce Conner, Stan Brakhage — or Shirley Clarke, Robert Frank and Adolfo Mekas — or at the end of the sixties, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Brian DePalma. In short, three very different kinds of filmmaking. The name just doesn’t pin down what it seems directed toward.

(5) “**Non-narrative Film.**” In a certain respect, one could say that this term refers to a sub-species — like “trance film,” “structural film,” etc. — a kind of category not of concern here; however, “non-narrative” also seems to be an all-encompassing appellation for any film which for one reason or another is not entirely explicit at first viewing, or which incorporates any number of camera and editing techniques to the extent that its style is too self-conscious to maintain a credible illusion of reality, even if the film contains a narrative continuity. In point of fact, despite numerous anti-narrative manifestoes within the movement, narrative is a key component of

many avant-garde films. This was especially true at the very beginning of the American school (Deren, Peterson, Broughton, Anger et al.) and then again in the late seventies during a post-minimalist and feminist critique phase (you see how easy names are!) perhaps best exemplified by the films of Yvonne Rainer.

(6) “**Abstract Film.**” Almost everything that applies to the previous term applies to this one as well. Names can encourage laziness. If a film seems technique-oriented and hard to follow it gets labeled “abstract” as a way of safely putting it in its place and making sure there are no potentially disturbing issues of content to get unsettled about. In short, a gross reduction of the sometimes quite specific aims of genuinely non-representational art, which is, as a matter of fact, a very rare thing. Sometimes one sees the avant-garde grossly listed under the term “surrealist,” too, another word that is often used in such a loose sense as to render it meaningless. The surrealists had specific goals as well and their art is a rare species; the term is *not* a synonym for “weird.”

(7) “**Art Movies.**” Again, there is a hopeless ambiguity — are we talking about Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini or Hollis Frampton and Robert Breer? Or self-produced films by gallery artists — like Julian Schnabel’s *Basquiat*? But more to the point, I have never heard the term “art movies” mentioned by anyone who didn’t mean it in a derogatory way as if to say — “oh, it must be an ‘art film,’ that’s why I didn’t like or understand it” — which, in turn, could be an arguably reasonable reaction if it were not inevitably accompanied by the utter conviction that those who claim to enjoy “art movies” are only faking their pleasure so that they can act superior to those who don’t. The fact is that there are many associated with film who think that the medium has embedded in it a strict allegiance to popularity — the people’s art as opposed to the art of ivory tower snobs, i.e. everyone else. Popularity or unpopularity is not by itself a distinction of whether a film is worth our attention or not. The world of the popular entertainment film has produced works of art. The world of the avant-garde has more than its share of bombs. A mentor of mine put the distinction this way: the worst Hollywood film is not nearly as bad as the worst avant-garde film. The reverse is also true: the best of Hollywood cannot compete with the best of the avant-garde. The former tends to be professionalized, convention bound, genre-oriented — all of which usually



protects one from absurdly undisciplined self-indulgence or a complete misfire. The latter tends to be sensibility-oriented (i.e. from an individual artist) and designed to either elude or take a critical stance towards current expressive conventions (i.e. strive for originality); the risks are greater and thus, so too are the rewards, for there is ultimately more at stake. There is difference, yes — but not along the lines that one school makes art, the other doesn't. Then again, once one leaves the context of the U.S., the distinction begins to break down even more thoroughly. In Hollywood, "art movie" is actually a *market* term for a relatively low-budget film with a small, targeted box office return — mainly from urban, sophisticated audiences. There it is perhaps a useful term, but we are still not talking about anything to do with art *per se*.

(8) "**Independent Film.**" The term independent by and large means a usually low or modestly budgeted film that is made independently of the major Hollywood production corporations, which might however receive distribution from said system. There is a significant history of the independent or maverick productions of Hollywood which, paradoxically, can often turn into the most expensive films every made, e.g. both *Gone With The Wind* and *Apocalypse Now* were independent features. But here one sees how the game is given away. One feels forced to say that such productions are independent *in a technical sense*, since by and large they conform to Hollywood status and standards. In other words you can't spend forty or even one million dollars and not expect to be making your money back. Thus, the *truly* independent films are those of the avant-garde which are far, far cheaper and are made as if the Hollywood financial system really didn't exist at all. The problem with calling avant-garde film, "independent" however, is that the term has so rich a heritage within the commercial system (where such things matter and where the distinction can really be understood) that at best it's a simple confusion, at worst it implies that certain low-budget films somehow escape the defining characteristics of mainstream Hollywood movies when this is almost always not the case. A related difficulty is similar to the difficulty in the next item.

(9) "**Free Cinema.**" A term which I don't believe has caught on in this country. I am not sure that I understand all its implications but they are certainly parallel to the name "independent," although the term "free" is perhaps preferable precisely because it doesn't have to contend with Hollywood history. Here, I think there are

connotations which imply that certain film artists have managed to jettison completely a whole host of aesthetic, economic, and socio-political assumptions of so-called dominant culture. It's a noble myth, perhaps, but a myth — a naive idealization that reminds one of the Disneyesque notion that Ludwig van Beethoven was the "man who freed music." Besides, as I have already indicated with the term "underground," the avant-garde has its own establishment and hierarchies, along with a support structure of academic positions, grants and fellowships, in which case freedom seems to mean exchanging one set of constraints for another more preferred. This name has the rare distinction, along with the next couple of names under discussion, in that it can't be used in a demeaning way — but by the same token it is almost absurdly ennobling.

(10) "**Alternative Cinema.**" Firstly, a name which underscores a problem with the two preceding terms, for it inevitably leads to a question: alternative to what? — or free of what? — independent of what? If a definition is tied to being *not* a particular something, then it is ironically tied to that something else — presumably forever, in a fashion, incidentally, that implies the continued dominance of that supposedly opposing item, e.g. the term "non-fiction" seems to insist (wrongly I believe) that the population as a whole reads more fiction than non-fiction. And besides, *not* being fiction certainly leaves a wide field of possibilities — from cookbooks to philosophical treatises. Secondly, does a true alternative follow from mere difference? We may like the avant-garde but that doesn't mean that it must claim an exclusive hold on our attention. When I wake up in the morning I am faced with the genuine alternative of wearing either one or another pair of pants. I can't wear both. On the other hand I can enjoy a Hollywood film *noir* of the late 1940s and Christopher MacLaine's *The End* of roughly the same era. It is only a naive point of view which sees taste as somehow a wholly consistent entity.

(11) "**Poetical Film.**" This has always been my favorite terminology precisely because it creates a simple, recognizable distinction (poetry versus prose) which goes far to create a reasonable context for understanding much of what avant-garde film tries to accomplish without creating a pre-determined evaluation upon it: no one would claim there is an objective reason for saying that poetry is superior to prose or vice versa; they are simply two different literary means or tendencies, whose borders overlap considerably but which seem to delineate a useful



distinction. Similarly, "poetry" embraces all kinds of approaches: conservative, innovative, dramatic, lyric, political, etc. — in short, all the various approaches which are contained within the avant-garde if said movement is not looked upon in a hopelessly reductive or distorted way, as is often the case. "Poetry" also goes a long way in explaining why we might value so highly films which are short but dense in their expressive complexity, intimate and thus outwardly modest, highly wrought with an always visible self-consciousness of technical means, respected but not necessarily "bestsellers." Those readers of prose fiction, for example, who never read poetry, usually chalk their habit up to a mere matter of personal taste. There is also the fact that many practitioners have had direct connections to poetry — either as accomplished poets like Jean Cocteau and Jonas Mekas; or, frustrated poets like Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Hollis Frampton. Admittedly, this direct relation was more pertinent twenty-five years ago than now, which in turn has made the term "poetical film" perhaps a dated concept, just as, sadly, poetry seems to be slipping away from the center of literary culture for reasons I don't quite understand. But the lurking problem with the term is that once introduced, one opens up a can of worms for an entire host of parallel terms of equal value. I don't know that Harry Smith cared for poetry at all but I do know he cared for music and many of his films might be best explained as "musical films" as might Peter Kubelka's or Ernie Gehr's. The formal implications of Michael Snow's or Robert Breer's films might entitle them to be called "sculptural film." Yvonne Rainer seems to practice a form of critical narrative we might call a filmic essay. And any of the many works of animation could easily fall under a category of cinematic painting as they often have in certain works of theory and criticism. Even the grossest Hollywood schlock film embodies the truism that film is a syncretic art — perhaps the syncretic art *par excellence*. There is no point then in pretending that any type of film (as opposed to individual works and artists) is privileged by a single connection to another art.

(12) "Avant-garde Film." The last to be dealt with because it is the one name with the most staying power — the very name I have had recourse to use while discussing the previous eleven. The term really implies a specific historical context — the high watermark of European modernism circa. 1910 - 1930, when certain practitioners of art and literature strove for radical innovation, purity of expression, and a dismantling of

conventional language and style. "Make it new" said Ezra Pound. As its name suggests, the avant-garde viewed itself as standing for what was *bynecessity* most advanced in art-making, even if this were at first wildly misunderstood and undervalued. These ideals have since been projected and retrojected onto other aesthetic generations so that (perhaps paradoxically) an avant-garde *tradition* of art has been traced from the early 19th C. up to the present day. This broad framework in turn suggests an alternative lens through which to understand the avant-garde's own rhetoric — viz. to see it as a fastidious, radically aesthetic (i.e. aristocratic and uncompromising) sensibility that violently strives to hold its own against middlebrow art — the ever more powerful bulwark of the two-hundred year old, bourgeois, liberal sensibility. The avant-garde will even go to the extent of embracing and transforming lowbrow popular fare or flirting with anti-democratic forms of political extremism (communism, fascism) as yet another, sometimes desperate way of challenging the accommodating and insipid manner of middleclass respectability. Fixing their projects to rigidly teleological tracks, avant-gardists have a tendency to wave flags vigorously. Crusty Robert Frost wrote home from England in 1913 about Ezra Pound: "He says I must write something much more like *vers libre* or he will let me perish by neglect. He really threatens."

Perhaps "avant-garde" should be treated as an historical term which has an accurate applicability only to one or two particular generations of 20th C. European artists and American expatriates who consciously saw themselves as heroic pioneers. Its importation into the strictly American scene can be made only with difficulty. While it is true that many post-war American filmmakers were quite aware of Europe's battle of various "isms" in the first half of the century — cubism, surrealism, vorticism, futurism, and so forth — they strike me as being refreshingly naive (in the best sense) when it came to their own filmmaking enterprises; that is to say, above all, they were at first making what they thought were good films, films which would immediately be appreciated by audiences as filling a gaping hole of sensibility left by the Hollywood entertainment and the European "art" films. It's open to question, then, whether the filmmakers consciously saw themselves primarily as avant-gardists who were eager to resurrect the great causes of the teens and twenties, even those filmmakers who, having come under attack, were provoked into producing manifestoes which echoed previous modernist declarations. Rather, lacking a better terminology, and using their historical understanding as a way of



explaining that which was often difficult to explain, it was the critics and commentators who most likely superimposed the pre-war name on them, usually alongside other names like "independent" or "poetic," as if to say that they themselves realized the only approximate fitness of "avant-garde." Critics have named art movements before (there is nothing wrong there) but one must at least be wary of borrowed terms.

It should also be borne in mind that "avant garde" is a military term after all, and one that implies a progressive direction for artistic enterprises. But does art progress in socio-political ways? — i.e. did James Joyce "improve" on the literary power of John Milton in the same way that ridding this country of its segregation laws has undoubtedly improved America's social fabric no matter how imperfect it may still be? Many of the greatest artists were aesthetically conservative (does liking Brakhage somehow exclude liking Jean Renoir?); or, to put things more accurately, over the long run of time, artistic battles become so remote that issues of progressivism versus reactionism seem pointless (and could only apply to the last two-hundred years anyway). Music apparently inspires the most violent polemics, but does the Wagner-Brahms or Schoenberg-Stravinsky controversy matter today unless one is an historian of taste? To believe the old rhetoric of the participants is to be duped by false arguments which admittedly once served a purpose, but now grossly disguise the authentic, enduring value of the art in the first place.

In fact, such is our skepticism in looking back on the age of the avant-garde, that I don't think we really believe in such a thing anymore — neither in the linear progression of art (modernism) in which each artist struggles to make the last work of art which is possible to be made, nor in drawing such sharp polemical distinctions among various artistic practices that a war-like metaphor seems appropriate. This is especially true of the last twenty years when the world of art making has been so pluralistic and fluid that one would be hard-pressed to come up with any "school" of filmmaking other than to say that out there in the big marketplace there is the arena of the large-budget, popular narrative film, and then there is everything else. To call that same "everything else" the "avant-garde" or any other all-embracing name, given the possibly wide latitude of results, seems absurd. Or, to place a particular premium on just that part of "everything else" which is innovative and radically challenging seems equally absurd since the desperate search for the innovative and the subversive has become its own trap. Admittedly, it is here that the

modernist myth does seem to have palpability; for, the progressive party has long since painted itself into a corner with little space to maneuver, i.e., is there something left to shock us with? At a certain point avant-garde itself can imply a formula, almost as if it were a genre. The final liberation has perhaps been that from the myth of liberation itself. "Avant-garde" has become, perhaps without our knowing it, a *nostalgic* term for a period when it made sense to threaten to kick certain artists out of the party if they didn't follow discipline — for instance, insisted on writing poetry in metre.

\* \* \* \* \*

It would have been nice to finish this catalogue of names with a final flourish, an unveiling of the "ineffable effable/ Effanineffable/ Deep and inscrutable singular Name," but as should now be apparent, the gesture alone would not only be doomed to frustration but inappropriate. Our view of art today, I suspect, is too democratic and utilitarian: we'll accept anything that's effective, that moves us. Such things are so rare we are willing to look into any quarter in order to find something satisfying and memorable and thus we shy away from faith in categories as being a potential barrier to appreciation. The former constraints which the old avant-gardists were battling no longer hold such dominating sway anyway. The aesthetic field is frighteningly wide open; in turn, the film scene has been fragmented (once one gets beyond the high profile Hollywood blockbusters) into a vast field of individual artists struggling to make the best film they can and somehow to get it seen by more than a mere handful of people. One can make a fruitful analogy to the contemporary state of theoretical physics in which no single general formulation is correct in all instances; rather, different phenomena are explained by a host of sometimes overlapping, often incompatible theories — but if a formula in a particular context can make accurate predictions, then no one is overly concerned as to whether its theoretical basis is ultimately "true" or not. It may actually be the case that physics will no longer again be able to find a single paradigm that unifies its view of the universe, yet this does not mean we should give up such a quest. For the time being, however, in the film world, we may simply have to settle for ambiguity, contradiction, and inevitable inaccuracy as we try (as we should) to identify and explain.

