

CHAPTER ONE



Introduction

In the words of Rosalind Krauss, "the historical period that the Avant-Garde shared with modernism is over" (170). And yet the films of the 1960s American independent cinema movement continue to have enormous repercussions in contemporary cinema practice, even if only in the most superficial way: the scratched titles for the feature film *Se7en* (1995); the ostentatiously hand-held camera of the television series *Law and Order* or *ER*; or the jagged, fragmented visual style of a typical MTV video. Commercials inundate us with meaningless flash frames, light flares, and skewed camera angles reminiscent of the '60s Avant-Garde, often created through digital imaging rather than direct photographic processing. But the originators of these techniques, and more importantly, the concepts and ideological constructs inhabiting and made manifest by these external stylistic manifestations, are often ignored or overlooked. As Habermas notes, "at the end of the twentieth century . . . philosophical thought appears withdrawn, cocooned in esotericism" (118). In the 1960s, however, it was quite a different matter; the entire fabric of human existence was being called into question, and discourse in both the arts and abstract philosophical inquiry was being practiced in the open, as part of the social economy of everyday existence.

In this examination of experimental cinema practice in the American experimental cinema of the 1960s, I want to consider primarily (but not exclusively) those filmmakers whose works have escaped into the phantom zone of the absent signifier through the exi-

gencies of poor distribution, lack of initial acclaim during "first runs" (the reception period of new cinema, until the advent of home video, had been characterized by a notoriously short "shelf life"), the reclusiveness of the filmmaker her- or himself, or a variety of other mitigating factors. Thus, certain cinematic works become historical commonplaces, while others, lacking critical champions, recede into the depths of individual memory. At the same time, I want to acknowledge the debt owed to more widely known cinema/video artists, as viewers/practitioners/scholars, in presenting the vision of the Avant-Garde to the general public. Most categorically, I want to allow each film to speak for itself, and each filmmaker (wherever possible) to speak for her- or himself through her or his writings, and to refrain, for the most part, from imposing an external ideological grid on the works discussed within this text.

It should be readily seen by now that all value judgments, however universally accepted (in either the positive or negative sphere), are almost entirely subjective, particularly when dealing with a cinema that set itself the preordained task of abolishing all the established rules of film/video syntax and structure. It seems to me that the only aesthetic rule that we should respect within the independent cinema is the rule of the filmmaker her- or himself, since this is the sole rule that governs production within this sphere of cinematic endeavor. Our reception of the spectacle that we collectively witness as viewers is an altogether different (and often tangential, or inconsequential) matter; many of these films were made with no expectation of winning an audience, and some were created for the sole purpose of alienating and/or marginalizing the viewer, and the concomitant demand for spectatorial pleasure implicit within the construct of the dominant narrative cinema. Certainly, any number of valuative strategies will insidiously seep in at the margins of my discussion, as such a priori assumptions have a way of doing, but my guiding principle in creating this text was to admit (and this was also one of the founding principles of the New American Cinema, when the non-censorial, non-selective Filmmakers' Cooperative was originally formed) all possible filmic (and occasionally, video) visions created during the rough time span of the 1960s, with occasional extensions into the 1940s or into the early 1970s. The fifth chapter, or "coda" of the work, suggests some of the ways in which these multiple visions are being carried forward by a new generation of experimental film and video artists.

One of the key aspects of the American Experimental cinema during the 1960s remains the *uniqueness* of each individual artist's vision; it is no more possible to confuse a film by Bruce Conner with

a film by Stan Vanderbeek (for example) than it is to mistakenly conflate the writings of Anais Nin and Paul Bowles from the same period. The voice of each filmmaker remained hers or his alone, and during a period when filmmaking was cheap, and a short B/W film could be made for as little as one hundred dollars (complete with an optical track and a final release print), there were few constraints on one's personal vision. Nor, I would hasten to add, has the independent cinema collapsed into a black hole of nonexistence within the confines of contemporary cinema. As Trinh T. Minh-ha observed in her study *Framer Framed*, "as a filmmaker it is odd to read so many commentaries bemoaning the demise of experimental cinema. A lot of this is misleading, because what is really happening is that people are speaking in a generational way, and are feeling a passage. They see the passing, and also the diminishing, through derivative work, of what they trust and found expansive" (246).

It requires an enormous amount of energy and resolve to continue the practice of experimental cinema in an atmosphere that is not entirely complementary to the values that alternative cinema espouses, or the questions that it inevitably poses. Many of the artists discussed in this book are now retired from active filmmaking, or taking an extended hiatus from their work; some are dead; others continue their work unabated. What Trinh T. Minh-ha terms "generational" is certainly a factor in the continuing "plate-shifts" of independent cinema practice. What is new cannot be eternally new; what is past comes back to us, recycled and reified through reinterpretation, restatement, and other derivative practices. The independent cinema is a figurative ground of contestation, in which ideas, gender roles, metaphoric/iconic/metatextual concepts and gestures of overt defiance form much of the text of the discourse. As Todorov observes, with the dissemination of new ideas through easily distributed mediums (books in the Gutenberg era; 16mm film in the pre-video era; VHS tapes in the 1980s; digital satellite dishes in the present), "populations, and thus cultures, that had been previously isolated from one another come into contact through [new] encounters" (78); it was this spreading of new ideas, new ways of looking at contemporary culture, which most shaped independent filmmaking practice in the 1960s.

That said, I should also acknowledge that as much as I might like to, I cannot possibly include (even parenthetically) the work of every independent filmmaker who was working during the period under discussion; this text is primarily a work of recovery and regeneration. Concomitantly, since much has been written on several of the artists I consider within this text, I have examined their work briefly, with-

out in any way intending or desiring to diminish their importance within the canon of experimental cinema, in order to include the lives and works of lesser-known artists. Thus we should consider anew the accomplishments and values espoused by these Avant-Garde American pioneer cinema artists; in a fresh consideration of their works, we may find new clues as to the origins of these important films, and new insights into the loose-knit community which brought about their creation.

In addition, this book seeks to present a newer, more unified history of the experimental cinema during this period, which returns to the egalitarian spirit of the era in which these films were produced. This is not an easy task; as Marcia Landy points out, "common-sense historicizing offers a seemingly unified narrative by relying on a sense of individual agency and of history as the final ground of moral and religious judgment. But through a critical lens, common-sense reconstruction of the past dissolves into a melange of competing perspectives, a multifaceted, polysemic representation of scenes, actors, and events" (129). In creating this text, then, I seek to avoid such an artificially unified narrative, organizing my text in roughly alphabetical order, but at every juncture seeking to privilege the voice of each artist above all other considerations, and allowing the leakage of discourse to flow freely from one film, and one filmmaker, to another.

At the same time, I seek to guard against the modular singularity of any one interpretation of these films as material artifacts, known to so few, and to de-center my own narrative within this text. Jacques Derrida noted that

I don't believe one can retranslate ones own utterances in an exhaustive fashion. It's better to produce texts that leave and don't come back altogether, but that are not simply and totally alienated or foreign. One regulates an economy with ones texts, with other subjects, with ones family, children, desire. They take off on their own, and one then tries to get them to come back a little even as they remain outside, even as they remain the other's speech. This is what happens when one writes a text . . . You think it's talking to you, that you are talking in it, but in fact it talks by itself. (157)

And thus, for the most part, I have desired to allow these films and filmmakers to speak for themselves within the time period they were originally created in, as autonomous texts and entities requiring little translation for contemporary readers.

Mainstream cinema seeks to uphold the status quo; it has always been the domain of experimental cinema to seek to disrupt this artificially enforced order. The experimental cinema of the 1960s sought to

question the legal and moral representations created in the dominant cinema practice. In the creation of these new works, experimental filmmakers embraced the notion that, "in regard to both time and space, the effect of the techniques of cinema is to pry perception loose from the larger world of which it is a part, subject it to extreme temporal and spatial condensation, and hold it suspended, floating in a seemingly autonomous set of dimensions" (Buck-Morss, 49). It is this autonomy of vision that was most prized by the '60s experimentalists, and their work covered a wide range of social, sexual, political and/or artistic concerns. The will to action in all human endeavor is that which seeks to celebrate the self; "in the will to suppress pain, we are led to action, instead of limiting ourselves to dramatization" (Bataille, 11).

The experimental cinema in the United States in the 1960s was nothing less than a call to decisive action to free the self from the dreams of the state, from the Orientalist strategies then pursued by the government in the prosecution of the war in Vietnam, from the neo-colonialist sign/system exchange apparatus ruthlessly applied by the dominant media. This new cinema was embraced by the transalterity of those for whom there has previously been no effective agency; it sought to escape the tyranny of history, and the commodification of the future in the mainstream cultural industry, through the abdication of all conventional standards of photographic representationalism. What was sought above all other considerations was a new way of apprehending the visual world, and of disseminating this vision to the widest possible audience. Financial gain was not a primary motive. What was at stake was nothing less than the care of the soul. What follows, then, is a compendium of those who worked within the cinema in the 1960s as an extension of their personal positionality within the social and cultural milieu of the 1960s, with commentary and interviews. It is not intended to be exclusive, but, hopefully, it will begin the process of historical renewal which this period so necessarily requires.