Art-House Cinema, Avant-Garde Film, and Dramatic Modernism

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The most important modes of film practice, in my view, are art-house cinema and the avant-garde, both of which contrast with the classical Hollywood mode of film practice. While the latter is characterized by its commercial imperative, corporate hierarchies, and a high degree of specialization as well as a division of labor, the avant-garde is an "artisanal" or "personal" mode. Avant-garde films tend to be made by individuals or very small groups of collaborators, financed either by the filmmakers alone or in combination with private patronage and grants from arts institutions. Such films are usually distributed through film cooperatives and exhibited by film societies, museums, and universities. (Consequently, such films can only usually be seen in urban centers—and only in a handful of those with any regularity.)

Significantly, this alternative system of production, distribution, and exhibition is not driven by profit. Avant-garde films rarely break even, let alone make a profit, through the markets of either the mass commodity or the luxury item. There is no market in the negatives of avant-garde films, and truly famous practitioners of avant-garde film have made their fame and fortune either through other activities (Andy Warhol) or through moving into the realm of the art-house film (Warhol, Derek Jarman, and Peter Greenaway). Most avant-garde filmmakers make a living as teachers, technicians within the film industry, or through other "day jobs." In this respect, the filmic avant-garde is markedly different from the avant-garde in music, literature, and especially painting—a fact that is obscured by the tendency of critics to talk of *the* avant-garde, as if its conditions of existence were identical from discipline to discipline.

Within the domain of cinema, the avant-garde differs not only from Hollywood cinema but from that other mode of film practice known as

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art-house cinema (even if there have been many practical and aesthetic crossovers, from Fernand Léger and Germaine Dulac to Chantal Akerman, Jarman, and Sally Potter). Art-house films are typically characterized by aesthetic norms that are different from those of classical narrative films; they are made within a somewhat less rationalized system of production; and they are often supported by government policies designed to promote distinctive national cinemas. But art-house cinema is still a commercial cinema, which depends for its existence on profits rather than the more ethereal rewards of status and prestige.

Although the notion of an art-house cinema had existed since at least the formation of the Film d'Art company in France in 1908, it was not until after the Second World War that European art-house cinema became firmly established, with the succession of movements such as Italian Neorealism, the French Nouvelle Vague, the New German Cinema, the Czech Renaissance, and the Brazilian Cinema Nôvo. A number of factors accounted for its rise at this point: new legislation in many of the European countries to support indigenous film cultures, combined with new opportunities for foreign films with an American film market increasingly filled with a college-educated audience.

The "art" in art-house cinema, it is important to note, differentiates itself from the art of other cinemas in two ways. First, art films are usually expressive of national concerns, even if these concerns are ones that, ironically, make them internationally marketable. (For example, it is partly the perceived "Englishness" of Stephen Frears's *My Beautiful Laundrette* [1985] that makes it of interest to American audiences.) Second, art films attempt to conform with canons of taste established in the existing "high" arts. That is, art films are generally characterized by the use of self-consciously "artful" techniques designed to differentiate them from "merely entertaining," popular cinema, and these techniques frequently draw on nationally specific legacies within the established arts (for instance, expressionistic painting in Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [Germany, 1920]; the *nouveau roman* in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* [France, 1959] and *Last Year at Marienbad* [France, 1961]; Italian opera in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem* [1970]). Such "native" cultural markers are often commingled with allusions, critical or affectionate, to American popular culture, and this internal contrast further highlights the national specificity of such films.

This strategy enables the art film to be viewed at home as part of a national culture and abroad as exotic or sophisticated—or both—and, therefore, as worthy of the attention of an educated audience. In the United States in particular, simply being European gives a film an edge in this regard because of the view of Europe as the "Old World" repository of Art and Wisdom. For this reason, art-house cinema still tends to be thought of as European, even though a substantial proportion of art-house material has for some

time come from Asia, South America, Australia, and (less frequently) Africa. Art-house cinema, then, is partly a matter of the marketing and consumption of films outside their countries of production, and the circumstances of production of art films vary widely depending on the peculiarities of particular national film industries.

In aesthetic terms art-house cinema encompasses a diverse range of options, from the "tradition-of-quality," literary adaptations of Merchant-Ivory (where the "art" usually amounts to little more than a national, picturesque "gloss" applied to classical narrative form), to the genre reworkings of Claude Chabrol, to the radical politic-aesthetic experiments of Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub, Dušam Makevejev, Nagisa Oshima, and Glauber Rocha. Within this diversity, however, some consistent trends and patterns stand out. Where the Hollywood film typically features a sympathetic protagonist pursuing his or her goal until an unambiguous conclusion is reached, the art film dwells upon characters with less clearly defined and singular desires. This produces a narrative less clearly structured by explicit temporal markers like deadlines and enables the self-conscious use of style to evoke atmosphere and ambiguity. In general, the art film foregrounds narration (the process of storytelling) as much as narrative (the action itself, assumed to be the locus of attention in the classical film). Distinctive uses of style and idiosyncratic narrational stances in turn become associated with individual directors, around which the marketing of art films centers. (A Chabrol film, for example, is marketed primarily as a Chabrol film, not as a thriller.)

Although the art-film director has more freedom to explore stylistic options, a story with recognizable characters must still be told, generally within a screening time of between 80 and 180 minutes, since in the end these are commercial films that must be exhibited on the art-house circuit. For these reasons, art-film narration has been characterized as a "domesticated modernism" and can be contrasted with the more radical departures from classical form found within the artisanal avant-garde. The key here, once again, is the freedom of artisanal filmmakers to explore spatial and temporal form in the cinema outside any obligation to tell a story; and to make films—with or without any traces of narrative—of any length, ranging from a few seconds to many hours.

What of the cultural and aesthetic character of avant-garde films, then? If mainstream cinema is governed by an ethos of entertainment—with all the associations of escapism and leisure implied by that term—the avant-garde, by contrast, aims to challenge and subvert. At its most radical, the avant-garde asks us to rethink fundamentally our preconceptions about cinema. The tone of this challenge may vary widely, from the aggressive stance of *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, France, 1928)—the film's notorious eye-slicing scene being an apt emblem of its attitude toward the

spectator—to the wit and playfulness of Robert Breer's work. An evening of avant-garde films ought to be thought-provoking and stimulating but offers no guarantee of being pleasurable or beautiful in the conventional senses.

For its part, the "otherness" of the avant-garde has been conceived in two distinct ways: as a parallel phenomenon and as a reactive phenomenon. Some have argued that the relationship of the avant-garde to commercial cinema is one of "radical otherness," in which each operates in different realms with next to no influence on each other. More typical is the view of the avant-garde as a "reactive" or "critical" phenomenon, continually challenging and undermining both the established values of mainstream society and the norms of orthodox aesthetic practice. Doubtless there have been individual avant-garde filmmakers who have had little knowledge or interest in commercial cinema, and thus in intentional terms were forging a parallel aesthetic. But looked at from a social perspective, even the work of such filmmakers becomes bound up in the larger rhetoric of the institutions of the avant-garde.

But from where, one might ask, do these cultural and aesthetic attitudes come from? One widespread view is that the subversive strategies of the avant-garde are a reaction to the rise of mass culture. Such "kitsch" culture relentlessly reduces art to stereotyped patterns incapable of arousing active, intelligent responses. The formulaic nature of mass culture offers only a debased sentimentality, providing nothing more than a temporary respite from the regimentation of work. The fundamentally stagnant nature of mass culture is masked, however, by a continual striving for superficial novelty, and to this end the "culture industry" co-opts every genuine cultural expression to its own ends. And it is this that gives rise to the avant-garde, the difficulty and obscurity of which is a deliberate act of resistance to such recuperation. The preservation of a sphere of autonomous artistic practice—that is, one guided by internal processes of development, not by the demands of the sociopolitical order—becomes, paradoxically, a political gesture. It functions as a form of resistance to a society that attempts to rationalize, commodify, and so degrade every aspect of life—to reduce even the "purposelessness" of art to the "purpose" of commerce.

Of the many things that such "alternative practices" have challenged, narrative and "realism" have often been prime targets because of their perceived dominance in commercial filmmaking. What counts as "realism" is an immensely complex issue, but what is objected to is realism's claim to an accurate rendering of the perceivable aspects of the world—continuity of time and space, for example—while equally real, if not directly visible, social and psychological processes are either ignored or mystified. Narrative, or more particularly the kind of traditional narrative form associated with the nineteenth-century novel and the Hollywood film, has been blamed for a variety of evils, but once again a constricting realism is central. "Classic realism," it is argued, presents a contingent view of the world as if it were

a necessary, inevitable one and, therefore, inhibits both psychic freedom and any impetus toward progressive social change. Films conforming to such "realism" are thought to induce a kind of passivity in the spectator, while anti- or nonrealist texts demand a much more active response. The German dramatist Bertolt Brecht is one of the most influential sources for this critique of "surface realism" and the contribution of traditional narrative to it, though kindred attacks can be found in surrealism and the French *nouveau roman*.

Such attacks react against the same common enemy: in Brecht's case, to stay with him and the theater for the moment, the modern drama of realism and naturalism—that is, the social-problem play as fathered by Ibsen, if not pioneered earlier by Friedrich Hebbel. Such realistic and naturalistic drama was based on the conventional, long-lived triad of psychology or motivation, causality or connection, and morality or providential design, but these problem plays banished theology as well as autocracy from their triadic paradigm of human action, in this way deepening the dramatic role played by psychology, sociology, and linearity or linkage. That is, in modern drama, the patriarchal relationship between God and the individual soul has been replaced by the adversarial relationship between man and his own psychology, his will to comprehend himself, even as the patriarchal relationship between ruler and subject has been replaced by the adversarial relationship between man and society, in the form of society's drive to marginalize all those that it cannot or will not homogenize. Thus the fundamental subject of almost all serious plays of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—in other words, of almost all of modern as well as modernist drama—becomes the attempt to resurrect fundamental ethical or philosophical certainties *without* resurrecting the fundamental spiritual certainty of a judgmental God or the fundamental political certainty of a mindful monarch.

Modernist or avant-garde drama, however, took modern drama a step farther by demonstrating that a play's movement could be governed by something completely outside the triad that links motive to act, act to logical sequence of events, and logical outcome to divine or regal judgment. In Maeterlinck's symbolist play *Pélleas and Mélisande* (1892), for instance, the characters are led to the slaughter like sheep but for reasons that are never clear, either to them or to the audience. There is sequence but no causality—that is, one event follows another but is not caused by it. Even an otherwise representational work like Chekhov's *Ivanov* (1887) can intimate the avant-garde by breaking down the connection between the psychology of its central character and the causal pattern of his drama. There is a causal sequence leading to Ivanov's marital infidelity and suicide, but there is no sustained motive on his part—which is to say, one event is caused by another but irrespective of this otherwise intelligent man's clear intent or wish.

For the avant-garde, beginning in the late nineteenth century with Jarry if not earlier with such German visionaries as Tieck, Büchner, and Grabbe,

the nature of reality itself became the prime subject of plays because of a loss of confidence in the assumed model for dramatizing human behavior and thinking about human existence: the representation of the illusion of reality on stage became, in other words, the demonstration of the reality of the illusion-making capacity, illusion-projecting essence, or illusion-dwelling tendency of the human mind. Through the introduction of total subjectivity into drama—that mirror of a supposedly external reality—the symbolists in particular imagined a new theatrical model, polyphonic in form and irreducible to rational analysis or univocal interpretation, thereby opening the way for the subsequent avant-garde movements that dominated the alternative stage, as well as experimental cinema, in the twentieth century.

A recurrent motif in the history of avant-garde drama or film, then, is the idea that neither need have become a narrative, representational form at all but could instead have modeled itself on other art forms, especially painting and music. A history of avant-garde cinema can be constructed in just these terms, counterposing the origins of orthodox narrative cinema in literature and theater with the painterly, poetic, and musical origins of the first avant-garde experiments. In doing this, one would be elaborating a gesture made earlier by, among others, Léger, Dulac, Maya Deren, and the art historian Élie Faure, who said that "there will some day be an end of the cinema considered as an offshoot of the theater, an end of the sentimental monkey tricks and gesticulations of gentlemen with blue chins and rickety legs."[1] The most extreme statement of this "antinarrative" sentiment may be found in the work of the "structural-materialist" filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s such as the North Americans Michael Snow and Ernie Gehr. But surveying the history of the avant-garde as a whole, it would be more accurate to say that narrative has been displaced, deformed, and reformed rather than simply expunged altogether.

One of the ways in which narrative became displaced, deformed, and reformed was through a cross-fertilization among the arts. Poets, painters, musical composers, circus performers, architects, choreographers, photographers, cartoonists, sculptors—any but professional or commercial filmmakers—were the models and sources for the radical shift in the aesthetics of narrative. And this was so not only for cinema but also for drama, whose own radical shift in aesthetics was influenced by the movies as well. Their presence was continually felt throughout the vigorous theatrical experimentation of the 1920s. On the one hand, the theater was seeking a new area of activity that the cinema—potentially, the most literally representational or documentally "real" of the arts—could not usurp; on the other hand, the theater frequently tried to explore ways of imitating and incorporating the fantastic or visionary capability of film form.

Throughout Europe, the dramatic avant-garde repeatedly expressed admiration for the film's dreamlike fluidity, its power to convey interior states of mind, as well as for its possibilities as a truly proletarian and

antibourgeois art. Particularly in France, the surrealist theatrical experiments of such writers as André Breton, Guillaume Apollinaire, Louis Aragon, and Antonin Artaud were perhaps better suited to the screen than to the stage, assaulting as they did the theater's traditional objectivity or exteriority and its bondage to continuous time and space. And a number of surrealists did indeed move from the theater to the cinema, most notably Jean Cocteau. In Germany film was one element among many of the influences that led to the development of dramatic expressionism (or vice versa), as German cinema and theater freely borrowed from each other during the 1920s. The debt to the stage, as well as to painting, of such pictures as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* has often been noted, and, to cite only one example, the characteristic roving spotlight of the expressionist stage was an obvious attempt to control audience attention in the manner of a movie director. The attempts of the Bauhaus group to create a nonrepresentational, manifestly manufactured "total theater" themselves involved the incorporation of film into the ultimate theatrical experience, as did the production experiments of Marinetti's "Futurist Variety Theatre" in Italy.[2]

The drama's shift to so simultaneously mechanical, democratic, and potentially subjective a model as the cinema is no accident, for film shares several characteristics with the theatrical avant-garde. First, both are fundamentally visual arts. This is not to discount the aural presence in film and avant-garde performance; it is only to say that visual communication was always the primary mode of communication in both forms. Film, because of its early technical limitations, and the avant-garde because of its disdain for literary or bourgeois drama, used visual codes, cues, and designs to affect their audiences. Even in Dada play scripts, which place a great deal of emphasis on sound, careful attention is paid to the arrangement of the words on the page and to the overall visual effect. Since many of the earliest avant-garde performers were also visual artists, their costumes, sets, and physical stunts often overshadowed the texts they were enacting. Their performances developed coterminously with film, and their live stage acts were often based on or related to American silent films widely available in the Paris of the 1920s, as well as on the increasing number of avant-garde films being produced in Paris at the time.

Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) Dada performances, *Relâche* (literally, "relax" or "no performance," 1924) and *Soirée du coeur à barbe* (*Evening of the Bearded Heart*, 1925), included, respectively, the films *Entr'acte* (1924) by Francis Picabia and René Clair and *La Retour de Raison* (*Return to Reason,* 1923) by Man Ray. Man Ray's film consisted of moving "rayographs," created without a camera by covering unexposed film with objects—salt, nails, etc.—then exposing the film to light and developing it. *Return to Reason* is an entirely silent film, containing only abstract moving images (the shadow of the objects in negative) and devoid of theme, character, dialogue, or plot. Although it is not quite as abstract as *Return to Reason*,

Entr'acte is little more than a series of visual puns and gags embellished by trick photography. Indeed, it was conceived as an intermission (the literal meaning of "entr'acte") for the Dada performance *Relâche*.

Buildings and rooftops in this film are shot at impossible angles, columns and streets are superimposed over and intercut with images of a ballerina, an ostrich egg, and Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray playing chess. The second half of the film is devoted entirely to a runaway coffin, vigorously chased by its fretful pallbearers. While the outlines of a narrative can be found in *Entr'acte*—involving the shooting of a man and his subsequent funeral featuring the runaway coffin—the energies of the picture are invested in a variety of non-narrative strategies that cut across and often completely disrupt its progress. Since narrative is a form of rationality—we explain ourselves through stories that reveal our reasons for doing things—rationality becomes an object of attack, along with standards of propriety. (Scattered throughout the film are "crotch shots" of the ballerina, which are ultimately revealed to be a bearded man in drag.) Narrative logic is thus replaced by an unpredictable mix of visually associative and abstract links.

Film so privileged visual elements over others not only because of its early limitations in terms of sound but also because of the fact that its history is tied in with the creation of various optical devices. Cinema's origins in series photography and devices like the zoetrope illustrate the prominence of the image over sound, text, and even narrative. As André Bazin writes in his "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," "If the art of cinema consists in everything that plastics and montage can add to a given reality, then the silent film was an art in its own right. Sound could only play at best a subordinate and supplementary role: a counterpoint to the visual image."[3] In fact, although Bazin is best known as an emphatic proponent of realism in film—the long take, deep focus, and a static camera—even he sees a connection between cinema as a visual art and the work of the avant-garde. In his "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin writes:

> Wherefore, photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it. The surrealists had an inkling of this when they looked to the photographic plate to provide them with their monstrosities, and for this reason: the surrealist does not consider his aesthetic purpose and the mechanical effect of the image on our imaginations as things apart . . . Every image is to be seen as an object and every object as an image. Hence photography ranks high in the order of surrealist creativity because it produces an image that is a reality of nature—namely, an hallucination that is also a fact.[4]

Thus, it is cinema's emphasis on the visual that connects it to the aesthetic principles of the avant-garde, even though film appears to exactly record reality.

Most importantly, both the theatrical avant-garde and cinema construct their visual landscapes according to the same aesthetic of collage. Expressed in films such as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), and in the visual creations of Dada artists Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch, the technique of collage—and its cinematic twin, montage—dominated the avant-garde in visual art and cinema and eventually emerged on stage. Specifically, both cinema and the avant-garde (especially avant-garde cinema) create works out of fragments. The principles of editing in film are little different from the principles of collage in art. Both involve the layering of visual fragments in relation to one another to create a cohesive whole. Höch aligns a photograph of a baby's head on top of an advertisement's picture of a doll's body and a single figure is created. Similarly, D. W. Griffith's parallel editing aligns two simultaneous events into a single narrative moment that articulates the complete event in time, even though it is occurring in two distinct places. The very essence of film is its assembly of fragmented images (each individual film frame) run together quickly before the human eye so as to create the optical illusion of movement. This is true of all film, whether avant-garde or narrative. The most linear Hollywood film uses shot-reverse-shot techniques that fundamentally fracture the otherwise straightforward progression of the narrative, even as the American Kenneth Anger's underground film *Scorpio Rising* (1963) disrupts its "biker" narrative by juxtaposing footage of it with "found" or quoted material like re-photographed television-program excerpts and cartoon clips. (Anger's soundtrack itself is created in such a collage fashion.) The theatrical avant-garde likewise constructs its early performances in fragments: spontaneous, dynamic spurts of activity that are layered upon one another until the wholeness of an image or idea is formed, just as it is at the screening of a film.

Indeed, even the advocates of cinematic realism recognized the essentially fractured essence of film. As the title of his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) suggests, Siegfried Kracauer argued that the essential purpose of film was the straightforward recording and revealing of the visible world. According to him, cinema, as the derivative of photography, favors unstaged reality, random events, and a "tendency toward the unorganized and diffuse which marks [it] as [a] record."[5] His language alone here could be used to describe an avant-garde performance, with its emphasis on randomness and chaos. However, Kracauer also argued that in order to reinforce its role as objective observer of this unstaged reality, cinema must necessarily allude to the world outside its frame, a quality he referred to as "endlessness." Still, what is most intriguing about Kracauer's argument is that, despite his insistence that film is fundamentally the representation of physical reality, he describes film as a fragment of that reality. He writes:

> Photography tends to suggest endlessness. This follows from its emphasis on fortuitous complexes which represent *fragments* rather

than wholes. A photograph, whether portrait or action picture, is in character only if it precludes the notion of completeness. Its frame marks a provisional limit; its content refers to other contents outside that frame; and its structure denotes something that cannot be encompassed—physical existence.[6]

In other words, for film to present reality, it must simultaneously and paradoxically draw attention to its own lack of reality. Kracauer is not dissimilar to Bazin here when he notes that film is not "real" but rather points to a physical reality that it cannot fully embody because of its limited frame and two dimensions. Kracauer thus establishes film as a fundamentally fragmented art form in terms of its individual frames and its incorporation of techniques such as montage, parallel editing, and the shot-reverse-shot format. Moreover, Kracauer's language above suggests that even in its most static, linear, and realistic form, film is still fragmented because it is a fragment of the real, which constitutes a whole outside the borders of the film frame. It is only logical, then, that avant-gardists should have admired the dynamic and fragmented quality of film enough to incorporate its principles into their texts and performances.

It is precisely the dynamism and fragmentation in the concept of the avant-garde that connect it so intimately to the concepts of modernity and modernism. "Modernity" refers to the network of large-scale social, economic, technological, and philosophical changes wrought by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. "Modernism" is usually used to denote that period of dramatic innovation in all the arts from around the end of the nineteenth century (with symbolism and aestheticism but going as far back as the romantic movement) up to the Second World War and its immediate aftermath (with absurdism), when the sense of a fundamental break with inherited modes of representation and expression became acute. That break is one of the reasons modernist art appears so fragmented and sectarian, as it represents the amorphous complexity of modernity—of industrial and postindustrial society—in a multiplicity of dynamic but unstable movements focused on philosophic abstractions. (Hence the use of such "-isms" as symbolism, futurism, expressionism, Dadaism, and surrealism, to describe them.) Modernism, moreover, employs a distinctive kind of imagination, one that insists on having its general frame of reference reside only within itself; the modernist mind accordingly believes that we create the world in the act of perceiving it. Such a view is basically anti-intellectual, celebrating passion and will over deliberative and systematic morality.

Most important, modernism implies an historical discontinuity, a social disruption, a moral chaos, a sense of fragmentation and alienation, of loss and despair—hence of retreat inside one's inner being or private consciousness. This movement rejects not only history, however, but also the society of whose fabrication history is a record. Modernism repudiates traditional values and assumptions, then, in addition to dismissing equally

the rhetoric by which they were once communicated; and in the process it elevates the individual over the group, the interior life of a human being over his communal existence. In many respects a reaction against realism and naturalism and the scientific postulates on which they rest, modernism has appositely been marked by persistent, multidimensional experiments in subject matter, form, and language. Literary excursions of a modernist kind revel in a dense, often free-form actuality as opposed to a practical, regimented one, and they have been conducted by poets and novelists as vital yet varied as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Thomas Mann.

Modernist or avant-garde drama and film are similarly associated, above all, with a pervasive, formal self-consciousness and inventiveness. The avant-garde thus becomes that element in the exercise of the imagination we call art that finds itself unwilling (unable really) to reiterate or refine what has already been created. Many, though, would also identify in the avant-garde not merely a tendency to retreat from the maddening disorder of the world for the purpose of creating, through art, an alternative, visionary, eternal order but also a tendency to absorb the world's chaos into the work of art itself. (The first tendency holds true for most writers of modernist fiction and verse, as it does for Yeats the symbolist playwright. Like their filmic counterparts, however, the majority of avant-garde dramatists belong either in the second category—like Luigi Pirandello, the humorist of the grotesque—or in both categories simultaneously, like the pataphysician Alfred Jarry.)

Many would additionally identify in the avant-garde a thematic preoccupation with the modern city and its technologies—with the exhilaration of speed, energy, and rapid development, as in the case of the Italian futurists—as well as with the urban potential for physical, social, and emotional dislocation (the latter dislocation erupting amid the former exhilaration in Walter Ruttmann's 1927 film *Berlin: Symphony of a City*). Such an avant-garde has been described as a culture of negation, and its commitment to ceaseless, radical critique—not only of the (bourgeois) art that went before it but also, in many instances, of the sociopolitical institutions and instruments of industrial-technological practice or power—may indeed by seen as a prime instance of the modernist emphasis on the creation of the new.

The term "avant-garde" itself is military in origin—however synonymous with "esoteric" or "incomprehensible" it may now be—referring to the "advance party" that scouts the terrain up ahead of the principal army. The expression was first used militarily around 1794 to designate the elite shock troops of the French army, whose mission was to engage the enemy first so as to prepare the way for the main body of soldiers to follow. The expression was first used metaphorically beginning around 1830, by French

revolutionary political movements who spoke of themselves as being in the "vanguard." Used as early as 1825, in fact, by the utopian socialist writer Olinde Rodrigues and later by Charles Fourier's disciple Gabriel Laverdant, the term "avant-garde" was applied to the "men of vision" of the coming society—statesmen, philosophers, scientists, businessmen—whose actions would direct the future development of humanity. It was only during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, that the metaphor was transferred wholesale from politics to literary and artistic activities.[7] Mainly attached to them ever since, the aesthetic metaphor has been used to identify successive movements of writers and artists who, within the larger cultural framework of modernism, generated a vital tradition of formal innovation or experimentation and sociopolitical radicalism.

There are thus, in some critics' view, two avant-gardes—a political and a cultural one—which sometimes walk hand in hand but by no means always do so. The political avant-garde in the cinema extends from the Soviet montage directors of the 1920s and early 1930s (the first such overtly political manifestation on film) to the work of such artists as Godard and Mikló Jánscó from the 1960s onward. The Soviets—chiefly Alexander Dovzhenko, Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, V. I. Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov—began their careers in the early years of the new Communist state. Like Soviet artists in other fields—the constructivist painters, for example—they were concerned to harness radical formal strategies to Bolshevik rhetoric, and until the 1930s such experimentation was supported by the state (though not without controversy). Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926), and Dovzhenko's *Arsenal* (1929) all relate tales of revolution drawn from Soviet history, organized around either a typical, "positive" hero, a "mass hero" (the proletariat in general), or both. These narratives form the basis of an agitational aesthetic, in which editing—as the label "montage" implies—plays a crucial role. Whether conceived primarily in terms of architectural construction (Kuleshov), dialectical conflict (Eisenstein), or musical disjunction (Vertov), montage aimed to infuse the narrative with a conceptual interplay out of which a revolutionary argument would emerge.

The apolitical (or, in some cases, less political) avant-garde, for its part, is concerned more with the development of a purist film aesthetic, running from Fernand Léger and others in France in the 1920s through the poetic, underground, and structuralist-materialist movements in postwar America as well as Europe. Indeed, France provides us with the first example of a fully fledged avant-garde film community in a liberal democracy. Over the course of the 1920s, a set of institutions developed through which noncommercial films, in three major groups, were made, distributed, exhibited, and critically discussed. First, there were the filmmakers associated with the style of impressionism: Abel Gance, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Marcel L'Herbier, and the early Germaine Dulac. These filmmakers generally made

narrative films that dwelt upon subjective experience and experimented with the ways in which cinema could render aspects of that experience (for example, Epstein's *La Glace à trois faces*, 1927). Many of these films were feature-length and exhibited commercially; in other words, they really constitute an early effort to forge a national art cinema. The second strand is that associated with the notion of *cinéma pur* (akin to Faure's "cineplastics"), in which the formal and often abstract exploration of cinematic possibilities dominated. Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924) mixes such exploration with other tendencies; later films by Henri Chomette and Dulac were "purer" still. The abstract experiments of *cinéma pur* have come to be thought of as exemplifications of the quintessential modernist aesthetic.

The surrealists, to whose theatrical origins I referred earlier, constitute the third grouping of alternative filmmakers in France. Surrealism was born out of the ashes of the earlier movement Dada, which had been founded in 1916 by a group of expatriate artists in Zürich. But the movement became an international one, with practitioners adopting the banner in Berlin, Cologne, and New York. Tristan Tzara, the Romanian poet who became the leader of the movement, moved to Paris, which became the major center for Dada, as it was later for surrealism. "Dada" itself is a nonsense word, and as such is a clue to the nature of the movement, which was anarchic, violently antitraditional, and vociferously antibourgeois. Many of the Dada artists had been involved in the First World War, and the Dada movement— represented in film not only by Man Ray and René Clair but also by Hans Richter—has been understood as a reaction of disgust at a society that could sustain such a barbaric conflict. If the war was the end-product of a society supposedly built on the principles of rationality espoused by Enlightenment philosophers, then the means of protest against this society would have to be irrational.

Surrealism was a more formal movement, with a dominant leader (André Breton) and a more elaborate theory, but it nevertheless continued the Dada interest in the irrational. This was now buttressed by explicit appeals to Freud's theory of the unconscious, as Breton, in 1927, identified two "methods" of surrealist composition: automatism, the attempt to relinquish conscious control of design in the actual creation of the art object; and the controlled depiction of dreams and images of the unconscious.[8] What the two methods share is the recording of fortuitous, "marvelous" juxtapositions, creating an impression of randomness and irrationality for the viewer and thereby rejecting the idea that art must cling to the representation of an everyday, visible reality. These textual strategies were echoed by the viewing habits that the Dadaists and surrealists purportedly adopted. According to Breton, groups of them would drift in and out of cinemas— disregarding the beginnings and endings of particular films—and break out picnic baskets and champagne while they watched. The effect of such fleeting, broken attention would thus be to undermine narrative unity and

turn fragments of narrative films into prompts for an oneiric, mentally or imagistically associative spectatorship.

The surrealists had been inspired by the Russian Revolution to believe in the possibility of a radically new society, and for a period in the late 1920s, they formally allied themselves with the French Communist Party. There was always a tension, however, between surrealist aesthetics and the demands of direct political agitation. The movement's alliance with the Communist Party eventually broke down in 1935 after "socialist realism" was adopted as the official aesthetic of the Communist Party, first in the Soviet Union and then in Western Europe. In the Soviet Union itself, Eisenstein, Vertov, and the other montage directors increasingly attracted criticism for the alleged exclusivity and elitism of their innovative work, in spite of its explicit Bolshevik commitments—so much so that their formal experiments were curtailed when socialist realism became mandatory in the Soviet Union in 1934. Thus, for all the differences between the Soviet montage movement and surrealism, there is an important parallel between them in their incompatibility with unalloyed, unadorned political agitation as manifest in the events of 1934-1935 in both France and the Soviet Union.

That said, state repression of the avant-garde was much more obvious under the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union, as well as that of Germany, where avant-garde practice was denigrated, respectively, as "formalist" and "degenerate." In both cases, avant-gardism in both the theater and the cinema was stamped out because it conflicted with, or merely failed to serve, official government policy. The dramatic decline of the European avant-garde in the 1930s is thus connected with a paradoxical feature of the avant-garde ethos: avant-garde artistic practice can flourish only under liberal political regimes, which are willing to tolerate vigorous expressions of dissent against the state and society. In this respect the avant-garde bites the hand that feeds it or, conversely, it pays involuntary homage to the bourgeois liberal democracies it attacks.

The rise of fascism and the arrival of the Second World War, then, were turning points not only in the individual lives of a great many artists and intellectuals, as an entire generation of artists was geographically displaced, politically silenced, morally co-opted, or simply executed (like the sometime Spanish surrealist García Lorca). Fascism and the war were also turning points in the history of the avant-garde as a whole. If the center of avant-garde activity between the wars had been Europe (with Paris often identified as being the "center of the center"), this role passed to the United States, or, more particularly, to New York after the war. Along with better-known figures such as Fritz Lang, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean Renoir, for example, Hans Richter was among the leftist intelligentsia who fled Nazi Europe for America. And, just as abstract expressionism emerged in the postwar years as the first style of avant-garde painting geographically rooted in the United States, so too did a vigorous avant-garde film community begin to develop.

By 1962 a cohesive noncommercial system of production, distribution, and exhibition had been created, with its centers in New York and San Francisco; a critical establishment was not long in coming.

Something similar occurred after the war in the American avant-garde theater, which, like its cinematic counterpart, is rooted more in visual performance than in written text, in a radical performative technique that dismantles and then either discards or refashions the overwhelmingly "well-made" drama of the American stage, as the work of the Wooster Group; the Living, Open, or Bread-and-Puppet Theatres; Mabou Mines; and Ping Chong attests. Such groups or artists became concerned less with what they were saying with content than with form and formal experiment: with the means of communicating, the places where theatrical events would take place, the persons employed as performers, and the relationship of performers as well as performance to the audience. This was so much the case that something called "performance art" developed along very loosely defined lines in the United States, as it privileged the indeterminacy and unpredictability of the event over the finish or finiteness, as well as fatedness, of the script.[9]

Yet even such performance art, especially in its original incarnation as Allan Kaprow's "happening" (where, in the late 1950s, visual art was "performed" by objectified human bodies), harks back to ideas first introduced by the futurists, Dadaists, and surrealists.[10] Impatient with established art forms, they turned first to the permissive, open-ended, hard-to-define medium of performance, with its endless variables and unabashed borrowings from poetry, fiction, film, music, dance, drama, architecture, sculpture, and painting. The impatience of these avant-garde movements was the result, again, of a deep-seated skepticism about earlier modes of perception—skepticism, that is, about the articulation of meaning through the logic of language or the language of logic.

Realism, together with its more complex descendent, naturalism, had been based upon the assumption that material or positivistic reality can be discovered and articulated through the systematic application of the scientific method to objective or observable phenomena. The consequent tendency to ignore subjective elements and the inner life led, in the view of avant-garde artists, to an oversimplified view of the world. The dramatic movements to come were as deeply concerned about truth and reality as their predecessors, but, finding the old definitions and formulations inadequate, they sought new ones. In this pursuit they were not antiscientific; rather, they attempted to incorporate scientific discoveries (by Einstein and Freud and later Werner Heisenberg) into a more comprehensive vision of the world. And that revised vision was prompted as much by World War I as by anything else.

The assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, started a four-year period of slaughter and mutilation

among whose victims was precisely the realistic play of the well-made school. Although the nineteenth-century theater was not killed outright in the first of the great world wars, it did receive a series of blows from which it would never fully recover. The stable world of the prewar era, reflected in a theater that had catered to a bourgeois audience and had held the mirror up to their lives, manners, and morals, began to disintegrate. With a million killed at the battle of Verdun and another million during the Russian offensive of 1916, with countries appearing, disappearing, and reappearing on the map of Europe, what did it matter if Madame Duclos committed adultery with her husband's best friend, or if Monsieur Dupont succeeded in marrying off his daughters? After the holocaust of mechanized war, the theater's depiction of the material and financial problems of the bourgeoisie became irrelevant, even obscene.

The realistic tradition and the well-made play were of course not killed in battle but only maimed and shell-shocked. They continue to drag out a senile existence in the rest homes of our commercial theater as well as our commercial cinema—despite the further horrors of World War II (including the creation and deployment of nuclear weapons together with death camps), the fall of communism but the rise of terrorism, repeated assaults from the Theater of the Absurd, and sporadic sallies on the part of post- or latter-day modernists in every medium.

NOTES

1. Élie Faure, "The Art of Cineplastics" (1920), in *Film: An Anthology*, ed. Daniel Talbot (1959; repr., Berkeley: University of Califronia Press, 1975), 4.
2. See E. T. Kirby, ed., *Total Theate: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1969); and R. W. Flint, ed., *Marinetti: Selected Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972).
3. André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" (1955), in *What Is Cinema?,* vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (1967; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 26.
4. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1945), in *What Is Cinema?,* vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (1967; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 15-16.
5. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 20.
6. Ibid.,19-20; emphasis added.
7. See Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); and John Weightman, *The Concept of the Avant-Garde* (London: Alcove, 1973).
8. See André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972).
9. See RosaLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1988).
10. See Allan Kaprow, "Happenings in the New York Scene" (1961), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (1993; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 15-26.