Public Libraries and the Contemporary Avant-Garde Film

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The problem with the avant-garde film is that it is truly in the advance guard of cinema, and therefore flies in the face of much of what libraries have traditionally stressed. In general, film collections in public libraries have tried to reach as wide a cross section of users in the community as possible, and at the same time they have tried to be relevant to the concerns of the community. Thus, collections have emphasized such subjects as black studies, civil rights, housing, poverty, the aging, and government. At the same time, collections have also had a strong cultural component featuring films on painting, sculpture, music and literature. However, the avant-garde film is different than films in these categories because, by its very nature, it is elitist. Its audience is by and large college-educated with a high level of sophistication in the arts in general; quite frankly, libraries have been more populist in their collection building.

If the public library is to try to meet the needs of all kinds of users, it must face up to the challenge and problems of the avant-garde film. In comparing it to the commercial (i.e., Hollywood) cinema, P. Adams Sitney, one of the chief spokesmen for the avant-garde, refers to its “radical otherness.” He points out that the two cinemas — one part of the entertainment world, the other part of the art world — operate in different realms without any discernible influence on one another. In the last ten years or so, the avant-garde film has moved out of its relatively obscure underground status. It now forms part of cinema studies programs in many

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major universities and it is exhibited in just about all the major American art museums that are concerned with modern art. While these factors may help to justify the avant-garde film in library collections, they often do not make it acceptable or palatable to wide numbers of the public or to many librarians. Even today, the avant-garde often brings forth the same violent emotions and negative reactions that unsophisticated viewers had when they first saw films by Bunuel, Leger, Man Ray, Eggeling, and Richter in the 1920s. The avant-garde film-maker works with discontinuity, dream images, metaphor, symbol, abstraction, and he has often been influenced by or been a part of movements in the other arts, such as futurism, surrealism, abstract expressionism and minimalism. Unlike most other works of cinema, the avant-garde films usually must be looked at again and again. Indeed, its major innovators have forged an entirely new visual language, one that requires a whole new mind set among viewers who have grown up watching Hollywood movies or commercial television.

The avant-garde field is large. It contains too many film-makers for most medium-sized libraries to afford collecting works by them all. This paper is an attempt to provide a buying guide for a basic collection representative of some of the best works created by film artists since World War II. Artists who do not wish to sell prints to libraries (e.g., Peter Kubelka) are omitted, as well as films that are prohibitively long in terms of library budgets. Also excluded are a number of film-makers who, although they work in a distinctly poetic fashion, are not generally included among the avant-garde. This group would include people such as Hilary Harris, Carmen D'Avino, Charles and Ray Eames, and Jan Lenica, among others. The reason these film-makers are excluded is that their work is largely comprehensible on the first viewing.

Libraries are fortunate that they can now turn to the American Federation of Arts as a source for film purchase. The federation is now making many titles available that in the past have not been considered commercial properties by the regular film distributors. It has taken a subsidized non-profit organization, in effect, to put them into the marketplace. The federation is, however, not the only source, and the distributors listed with the titles below are given with their addresses at the end of this article.

A listing of film-makers and films for a basic collection in a public library is provided here. The final decision of what to include is a personal one, based largely on the author's own experiences with them in a library setting. The four major figures in this field seem to be Stan Brakhage, Bruce Baillie, Hollis Frampton, and Michael Snow. Therefore, the works of these people are presented separately at the head of the list. While
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much of their work is extremely long and therefore prohibitively expensive, they have all made characteristic shorter works; it is these which are listed here. More than any other artists working today, they have extended the boundaries of cinema in unique and original ways.

STAN BRAKHAGE

Prelude: Dog Star Man. 25 minutes, color. Jane Brakhage, 1959-64. Contains rapid flashes of images and multilevel superimpositions that convey the elements of earth, air, fire, and water. An introduction to a much longer work.


Mothlight. 4 minutes, color. Jane Brakhage, 1963. The image consists of moth wings and plants embedded in the film.

BRUCE BAILLIE


HOLLIS FRAMPTON


Tiger Balm. 10 minutes, color. Peter Feinstein, 1972. A minimal film to evoke a meditational state.


MICHAEL SNOW

Wavelength. 45 minutes, color. American Federation of Arts, 1967. A seminal structural film; the setting is the film-maker's loft.

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OTHERS

The following is a listing of other artists and their works that are basic to an avant-garde collection:

KENNETH ANGER

_Eaux D'Artifice_. 13 minutes, color. Creative Film Society, 1953. (The only Anger film available to libraries.)

JORDAN BELSON

Allures. 5 minutes, color. Pyramid Films, 1961.
Chakra. 6 minutes, color. Pyramid Films, 1972.

JAMES BROUGHTON


ROBERT BREER

_Jamestown Baloos_. 7 minutes, black and white. Robert Breer, 1957.
_Man and Dog Out for Air_. 2 minutes, black and white and color. Robert Breer, 1952.

BRUCE CONNER

_A Movie_. 12 minutes, black and white. Serious Business Co., 1957.
_Take the 5:10 to Dreamland_. 5 minutes, black and white. Serious Business Co., 1975.

MYA DEREN

_Meshes of the Afternoon_. 14 minutes, black and white. Grove Press Films, 1943.
_Study in the Choreography for Camera_. 4 minutes, black and white. Grove Press Films, 1945.

TOM DEWITT

_Atmosfear_. 9 minutes, color. Tom DeWitt, 1966.

ED EMSHWILLER

_Film with Three Dancers_. 20 minutes, color. Ed Emshwiller, 1970.
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James Herbert


Will Hindle


Ian Hugo


Larry Jordan


George Landow


Gunvor Nelson


Norman McLaren

*Blinkity Blank*. 6 minutes, color. International Film Bureau, 1955.
*Fiddle-de-dee*. 4 minutes, color. International Film Bureau, 1947.

Pat O'Neill


Sidney Peterson


David Rimmer


Paul Sharits

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STAN VANDERBEERK


JOHN WHITNEY


Following is a reference list of distributors of avant-garde films, including addresses for contacts regarding availability.

American Federation of Arts, 41 East 65th Street, New York, New York 10021
Jane Brakhage, Box 6, Rollinsville, Colorado 80474
Robert Breer, Ludlow Lane, New York 10964
Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 406 Jarvis Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Creative Film Society, 7237 Canby Avenue, Reseda, California 91335
Tom DeWitt, Bedell Road, Poughkeepsie, New York 12603
Ed Emshwiller, 43 Red Maple Drive N., Wantagh, New York 11794
Peter Feinstein, 36 Shepard Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138
Film Images (now Radim Films), 17 West 60th Street, New York, New York 10023
Grove Press—Cinema 16 Film Library, 196 West Houston Street, New York, New York 10014
James Herbert, Art Department, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30601
Serious Business Company, 1588 Fell Street, San Francisco, California 94117
Pyramid Films, P.O. Box 1048, Santa Monica, California 90406