

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.

Window Water Baby Moving. 12 minutes, color. Jane Brakhage, 1959. Birth of the Brakhages' first child.

Dead. 11 minutes, color. Jane Brakhage, 1960. A cemetery in Paris.

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

BRUCE BAILLIE

Castro Street. 10 minutes, black and white. American Federation of Arts, 1966. Impressionistic study of a railway switching yard using superimpositions.

Mass for the Dakota Sioux. 24 minutes, black and white. American Federation of Arts, 1964. Metaphorical work structured after the Catholic mass.

HOLLIS FRAMPTON

Critical Mass. 25 minutes, black and white. Peter Feinstein, 1974. Image and soundtrack merge, disengage, and repeat as a man and woman argue.

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

Lemon (for Robert Huot). 7 minutes, color. Peter Feinstein, 1969. Study of a lemon.

MICHAEL SNOW

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

Breakfast (Table Top Dolly). 15 minutes, color. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 1972 and 1976. Structural examination of a breakfast.

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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

The Bed. 20 minutes, color. Serious Business Co., 1968.

ROBERT BREER

Gulls and Buoys. 7 minutes, color. Robert Breer, 1972.

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

Maypops. 20 minutes, color. James Herbert, 1970.

WILL HINDLE

Billabong. 8 minutes, color. American Federation of Arts, 1968.

IAN HUGO

Gondola Eve. 27 minutes, color. Film Images, 1964.

LARRY JORDAN

Our Lady of the Spheres. 10 minutes, color. American Federation of Arts, 1969.

GEORGE LANDOW

The Film That Rises to the Surface of Clarified Butter. 9 minutes, color. American Federation of Arts, 1968.

GUNVOR NELSON

Moon's Pool. 15 minutes, color. Serious Business Co., 1974.

NORMAN MCLAREN

Blinkity Blank. 6 minutes, color. International Film Bureau, 1955.

Fiddle-de-dee. 4 minutes, color. International Film Bureau, 1947.

PAT O'NEILL

Runs Good. 15 minutes, color. Serious Business Co., 1971.

SIDNEY PETERSON

Lead Shoes. 20 minutes, black and white. American Federation of Arts, 1949.

DAVID RIMMER

Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper. 8 minutes, color. Serious Business Co., 1970.

PAUL SHARITS

T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G. 12 minutes, color. American Federation of Arts, 1968.

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STAN VANDERBEEK

Newsreel of Dreams. 16 minutes, color. American Federation of Arts, 1971.

JOHN WHITNEY

Permutations. 7 minutes, color. Pyramid Films, 1967.

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