

**ENG 6137, Spring 2024****“Avant-Garde Film (and the Question of an Avant-Garde Film Studies)”**

Prof. Trevor Mowchun

Office: TUR 4364

Office hours: Wednesday 4-6pm, or by appointment.

Class: Wednesday E1-E3 (7:20pm-10:10pm), TUR 2334

Screening: Tuesday E1-E3 (7:20pm-10:10pm), ROL 115

\*There will be a Tuesday screening session after all. However, films will also be shown in class and these will be our main focus in class discussion. Films shown during the Tuesday screening are equally important for context and their own artistic merit, but they will not be our main focus in class.

**Course Description**

Bubbling beneath the mainstream marketplace of commercial and consumable cinema lies the alternative realm of the avant-garde: experimental, unpredictable, daring, defiant, dangerous. If everyday waking life with its familiar patterns of thought and recurrent habits of action is analogous to mainstream popular cinema in its most derivative and derelict form, then the unconscious world of insight, intuition, and dream—revealing to us, each night, our inner repressed truth—is the avant-garde film confronting us, interrupting the status quo, freeing thought and feeling from external constraints and pressures towards “normalcy.” To study the avant-garde film, therefore, is to lose our senses, as it were, to abandon formulaic ways of seeing and understanding the world and ourselves. As there is no single stable meaning fixed to the avant-garde, we will explore a variety of possibilities to ensure our path through avant-garde film history, aesthetics and culture remains open to surprise and destined for the underground where no amount of prior knowledge will safely light the way to the certitudes we may long for (but will learn to relinquish in favor of “non-knowing”). Some theoretical frameworks and artistic forms of expression to help guide our investigations into avant-garde film are as follows: aesthetics, non-narrative or anti-narrative discourse, formal experimentation/innovation, self-reflexivity, transgression, abstraction, poetry, politics, shock, phenomenology, corporeality, and the unconscious. The influential (and sometimes infamous) avant-garde movements of the 20th century (e.g., Surrealism, conceptual art, performance art) will also be discussed in their crosspollinations with film.

Running parallel to this investigation will be the question pertaining to the study of films that confound or altogether resist study. Does avant-garde film call for the cultivation of what we may refer to as “avant-garde film studies”? Beyond the question of how to analyze avant-garde film through the various avenues of hermeneutic criticism, can the discipline of film studies take on the spirit of the avant-garde by “un-disciplining itself”?

**Books:**

- Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception & Heaven and Hell* (Harper Perennial, 2009).  
\*Purchase or find online.
- Sidney Peterson, *The Dark of the Screen* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1980).  
\*Purchase via Anthology Film Archives website. If unavailable or delayed then I will provide a digital copy.
- Maureen Turim, *Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985).  
\*Excerpts on ARES; entire book available online.
- William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993). \*Purchase via Anthology Film Archives website or find online.

**Books on celluloid-based experimental film practices:**

- \*Read the following throughout the semester to learn the technical logistics of experimental film. The sooner you read these books/manuals, the sooner you will know the answer to the question: “How did they do that?”
- Textbook: Kathryn Ramey, *Experimental Filmmaking: Break the Machine* (Routledge 2015).  
\*Available as UF library e-book.
- Handmade DIY book: *Recipes for Disaster*, edited by Helen Hill. \*Available free online.

**\*Book chapters, essays and interviews will be available on Course Reserves (ARES).**

**Course Schedule**

- \*Subject to change.
- \*As much as possible, film selections will be determined by the quality of the digital copies available.
- \*Please be advised that avant-garde films can be challenging, controversial, or graphic by their very nature.
- \*It’s crucial to attend all classes and screenings to know which films are being shown and to see them projected on a large screen. Many of these films are not readily available online.

**Week 1 (Jan. 10): Introduction; What is “Not” Avant-Garde**

Films:

- Prologue to *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966)
- *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren & Alexander Hammid, 1943)

**Week 2 (Jan. 17): Surrealism and Futurism**

Films by Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Fernand Léger, René Clair, Sidney Peterson.

Tuesday screening: *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel and Dalí, 1929), *L’age D’or* (Buñuel, 1930)

Texts:

- André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism (1924),” in *Manifestos of Surrealism*. \*First manifesto is on ARES, entire book available for free online. Read past 1<sup>st</sup> manifesto if you’re interested.
- Jean Goudal, “Surrealism and Cinema,” in *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, ed. Paul Hammond. ARES
- Filippo T. Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto* (1909). ARES

- P. Adams Sitney, "Chapter 3: The Potted Psalm," in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*. ARES

### **Week 3 (Jan. 24): Sidney Peterson (cont'd) and Maya Deren**

Films by Sidney Peterson (with James Broughton), Maya Deren.

Tuesday screening: Films by Maya Deren (*At Land, A Study in Choreography for Camera, Ritual in Transfigured Time, Meditation on Violence, The Very Eye of Night*)

Texts:

- Sidney Peterson, *The Dark of the Screen*.
- Robert Ray, "Invention Finds a Method: Surrealist Research and Games" and "Nadja and Simulation," in *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995). ARES

### **Week 4 (Jan. 31): Animation**

Various animation styles: silent, visual music, collage, spotlight on Robert Breer.

Tuesday screening: Collage films by Stan Vanderbeek, Robert Breer's *Fugi*

Texts:

- Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. ARES
- Aldous Huxley, "Heaven and Hell" and "Appendices," in *The Doors of Perception & Heaven and Hell*.
- National Film Board of Canada animation workshop (instructed by Norman McLaren).

### **Week 5 (Feb. 7): Stan Brakhage**

Films by Stan Brakhage

Tuesday screening: *Dog Star Man* (1961-64)

Texts:

- Stan Brakhage, "Selections from *Metaphors on Vision*," in *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson. ARES
- William C. Wees, "Chapter 3: 'The Untutored Eye'" and "Chapter 4: 'Giving Sight to the Medium': Stan Brakhage," in *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film*. ARES
- Stanley Cavell, "Excursus: Some Modernist Painting," in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). ARES

### **Week 6 (Feb. 14): Structural/Materialist/Conceptual Film**

Films by Andy Warhol, Peter Gidal, Malcolm LeGrice, Peter Kubelka, Kurt Kren, Hollis Frampton

Tuesday screening: Films by Frampton (*nostalgia, Surface Tension, Lemon, Gloria!*)

Texts:

- Maureen Turim, "Introduction: Tracing the Rupture of the Avant-Garde," in *Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films*. ARES
- Peter Gidal, "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film," in *Structural Film Anthology*. ARES
- Malcolm LeGrice, "Abstract Film and Beyond," in *Structural Film Anthology*. ARES

- Stefan Grisseemann, "Fundamental Punk: On Kurt Kren's Universal Cinema," in *Film Unframed: A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema*. ARES

### **Week 7 (Feb. 28): Structural/Materialist/Conceptual Film (cont'd)**

Films by Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, et al.

Tuesday screening: *Wavelength* (Snow, 1967), *Zorns Lemma* (Frampton, 1970)

Texts:

- Hollis Frampton, "A Pentagram for Conjuring the Narrative." ARES
- Maureen Turim, "Chapter 5: Visual Dynamics, Referential Tensions and Conceptual Film" and "Chapter 7: Scanning Landscapes and Collapsing Architectures: Shattering the Grounding of the Subject/Eye," in *Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films*. ARES/ONLINE

### **Week 8 (Mar. 6): Flicker Films**

Films by Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits, Jordan Belson, Ernie Gehr.

Tuesday screening: Films by Belson (*Allures*, *Samadhi*) and Sharits (*NOTHING*)

Texts:

- Maureen Turim, "Chapter 6: Flickering Light, Pulsing Traces," in *Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films*. ARES
- Paul Sharits and Peter Gidal, "Paul Sharits: Notes on Films," in *Structural Film Anthology*. ARES
- William C. Wees, "Chapter 6: Making Films for the Inner Eye: Jordan Belson, James Whitney, Paul Sharits," in *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film*. ONLINE

### **Week 9 (Mar. 13): Spring Break**

### **Week 10 (Mar. 20): Ernie Gehr and Larry Gottheim**

Films by Ernie Gehr and Larry Gottheim

Tuesday screening: *Signal: Germany on the Air* (Gehr, 1982-85), *Mouches Volantes* (Gottheim, 1976)

Texts:

- P. Adams Sitney, "Ernie Gehr and the Axis of Primary Thought," in *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*. ARES
- Jeffrey Skoller, "Chapter 4: Specters: The Limits of Representing History," in *Making History in Avant-Garde Film*. ARES

### **Week 11 (Mar. 27): Larry Gottheim and James Benning (with Bette Gordon) (cont'd)**

Films by Larry Gottheim and James Benning/Bette Gordon.

Tuesday screening: *11 x 14* (Benning, 1977)

Texts:

- Scott Macdonald, "Chapter 1: Garden in the Machine," in *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place*. ARES
- Larry Gottheim, "Natural Selection: My Mind and the Mind of Others (excerpt from *The Red Thread*)." ARES
- Scott MacDonald, "James Benning," in *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. ARES

**Week 12 (Apr. 3): Found Footage**

Films by Joseph Cornell, Bruce Connor, Arthur Lipsett, Ken Jacobs, Abigail Child, David Rimmer.

Tuesday screening: *Rose Hobart* (Cornell, 1936), *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (Jacobs, 1969)

\*excerpt

- Text: William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (first half).

- Amelia Does, "Free Fall: Lipsett is the Shaman, Film is the Ritual," in *Senses of Cinema*.

ARES

**Week 13 (Apr. 10): Found Footage (cont'd)**

Films by Peter Kubelka, Martin Arnold, Peter Tscherkassky.

Tuesday screening: Tscherkassky's Cinemascope Trilogy (*L'Arrivée*, *Outer Space*, *Dream Work*) (1997- 2001)

Texts:

- William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (second half).

- Peter Tscherkassky, "There Must Be Something in the Water," and Maureen Turim, "Works of Dreams and Shadows: The Films of Peter Tscherkassky," in *Film Unframed: A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema*. ARES

**Week 14 (Apr. 17): The Diaristic and Aphoristic**

Films by Oscar Fischinger, Marie Menken, Jonas Mekas, Peter Hutton, Robert Beavers.

Tuesday screening: Excerpts from *Walden* by Mekas

Texts:

- P. Adams Sitney, "Jonas Mekas and the Diary Film" and "Robert Beavers's Winged Distance/Sightless Measure: The Cycle of the Ephebe," in *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*. ARES

- Writings by Robert Beavers. ARES

**Week 15 (Apr. 24): The Body, Performance, Queerness**

Films by Williard Maas, Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Kurt Kren.

Tuesday screening: Films by Anger (*Fireworks*, *Scorpio Rising*, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*)

Texts:

- Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Chapter 1: Formation, Deformation, and Reformation: An Introduction to the Grotesque," in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. ARES

- Susan Sontag, "Jack Smiths' *Flaming Creatures*," in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*. ARES

- R. Bruce Elder, "Troubling Body of Sexual Difference: Williard Maas's *The Geography of the Body*," in *Body of Vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry*. ARES

## Coursework:

- *Notebook*: Keep a notebook over the course of the semester. Choose 3 films and 2 readings from each week and write a ½ – 1-page response to each one. (No entries are required for Week 1).
  - These entries can be speculative and connected to your own experience.
  - Focus on the aspects/details that interest you most.
  - In the case of the films, balance description of audiovisual elements with some speculation/interpretation regarding their significance.
  - Experiment with methods of analysis and writing styles suited to the avant-garde nature of these films.
  - For the readings, provide some insight on what is at stake in these texts. Consider to what extent the research methods and writing style are commensurable with the films, or if other methods/styles of writing should be employed.

\*Notebooks will be due 3 times throughout the semester, yet you should write weekly while the material is fresh in your mind.

\*Due: Feb. 14 (hardcopy in class), Mar. 27 (hardcopy in class), May 1 (Canvas by midnight) – 25% each = 75%

- *Final essay* (10 pages, not including bibliography): Write on one film from the course that you wish to learn more about.
  - Do some outside research on the film, drawing on at least 3 texts.
  - Some basic questions to consider: How was the film made? More specifically, how was it shot? How was it edited? Where/how does the film fall in the filmmaker's body of work?
  - Explore the social/historical context surrounding the film.
  - After considering these and other relevant questions, write a detailed analysis of the film, factoring in your own experience of it and making connections with at least one other film by the same or adjacent filmmaker.
  - Your essay can take an experimental approach to research/writing, or should address the question of how to deal with the film(s) in a manner suitable to the avant-garde.

\*Optional filmmaking assignment: Alternatively, you can make a film in the spirit of the avant-garde. A written conceptualization and/or script are also required. Discuss with me ahead of time if you are interested in pursuing this path.

\*Due: May 3 (Canvas by midnight) – 25%

## Grade Scale

<b>A</b> 4.0 94-100%	<b>C</b> 2.0 73-76%
<b>A-</b> 3.67 90-93%	<b>C-</b> 1.67 70-72%
<b>B+</b> 3.33 87-89%	<b>D+</b> 1.33 67-69%
<b>B</b> 3.0 83-86%	<b>D</b> 1.0 63-66%
<b>B-</b> 2.67 80-82%	<b>D-</b> 0.67 60-62%
<b>C+</b> 2.33 77-79%	<b>E</b> 0.00 0-59%

### **Policies and Services**

- Written work should be 1.5 or double-spaced with standard-sized margins.
- For digital submissions, Word or PDF files are acceptable.
- Late submissions without approval will be penalized. Discuss with me ahead of time if you need an extension.
- Regular attendance is essential. If I see that you are consistently absent then your grade will be adversely affected. Communication with the instructor is crucial to avoid misunderstandings related to absences. These policies are consistent with the UF's attendance policies. For more information on these policies, please visit:  
<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>
- The use of cell phones and internet browsing during class are prohibited.
- Please do not record any class without permission from me.
- Academic Honesty and Definition of Plagiarism. Plagiarism violates the Student Honor Code and requires reporting to the Dean of Students. All students must abide by the Student Honor Code:  
<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-code-student-conduct-code/>
- Students with disabilities who are requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, <https://drc.dso.ufl.edu/>).
- For information on UF Grading policies:  
<https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>
- For counseling or urgent help you may call the on-campus Counseling and Wellness Center at 352-392-1575, or contact them online: <https://counseling.ufl.edu/services/individual/>
- UF's policy on Harassment: UF provides an educational and working environment that is free from sex discrimination and sexual harassment for its students, staff, and faculty:  
<https://hr.ufl.edu/forms-policies/policies-managers/sexual-harassment/>