



“A flickering brain, which relinks or creates loops – this is cinema.”

GILLES DELEUZE (1925–1995)¹

INTRODUCTION

The demise of the film medium has been widely debated. Until recently, however, this debate has been speculative and focused on imagined, possible futures. The demise of film is now a reality. This gives the debate a new and interesting twist. I see a large interrobang²- the combined exclamation-question mark – hovering over the whole field, in terms of theory, but especially in terms of practice. There is much to say and do regarding the practice of using film as a medium in the context of fine art. This body of work contributes to this in a specific way.

In the otherwise bountiful world of experimental film scholarship and criticism there is a shortage of research that looks to the actual methods and practices that artists use while working. The present thesis tackles this gap by looking at the praxis of analogue film art making (through a series of case studies) in the context of experimental film at the precise historical moment when the medium is becoming obsolete. This text critically examines experimental film practice through interviews and a wide range of scholarly material supported by appropriate material from ephemeral journals, program notes, and blogs.

With the concrete awareness that film belongs to a specific historical period, a new phase of discussion has emerged among artists about film's unique characteristics. The aim of this dissertation is to illuminate where this concern springs from by scrutinizing a number of essential experimental film practices, such as hand processing, cameraless filmmaking and optical printing. The question of the demise of a medium, with its problematic undertones of nostalgia, leads to further questions concerning the effect this has on the entire field of art.

The experimental film community, while marginal and dispersed, has a tradition of pedagogical concern that manifests in grassroots

activities such as provision of filmmaking skills, access to equipment and screenings of both old and new work. (Historically, this has been important for practitioners who have not had any representation in the commercial world of film.) I aim to demonstrate that the cultural, historical, and literary context of experimental film is found in the practice itself. I have come to hold this viewpoint as a consequence of being a practitioner, teacher and curator. The incentive to do this has come from my own practice before and during this research process and just as importantly from seeing works by other artists – I see my practice in the field of experimental film to have a hermeneutic circle built in it: teaching, curating, making and showing the works as well as seeing those of colleagues in this fairly marginal field adds to the understanding of the whole by reference to the individual parts.

The impetus for my research grew from the practice of making artworks, as I found the entire medium that I worked with – analogue film, the culture surrounding it and the practical craft essential to it, were on a rapid road to historical oblivion. My research question has two parts. Firstly, what defines or at least characterizes the practical field of experimental film? Secondly, why artists are still interested in using film as their medium and what are the indications for the future of experimental film practice given the decline of film technology? My specific area of investigation is the lineage of structuralist experimental film. I will link the sixties/seventies structuralist film with some threads in contemporary fine art filmmaking.

My approach has been somewhat Bricologic³ as I have proceeded through my research by transferring ideas from my practice to my theoretical reflection which I then bring to bear on my practice, so as to see how it all fits together. In my own artistic practice I often work with similar Bricologic methods, bouncing between things, limiting my process by using awkward tools and “tinkering” with bits and pieces (cultural residues and pieces of obsolete technologies).

The first chapter defines the scope of this dissertation and gives a brief account of the conceptual framework underpinning *structuralist film*. The subsequent four chapters examine different areas of practice

within experimental film: laboratory work in chapter two; the physical filmstrip in chapter three; alternative approaches to the camera apparatus in chapter four; and the presentation of film beyond the conventional square screen in chapter five. Chapter six reflects on claims regarding the demise of film and its implications for experimental film practice.

Given that this research combines written and audiovisual elements (six films), the two necessarily complement each other through numerous thematic and practical points of contact. For the sake of clarity, I have also included an Appendix that concisely presents the six film works of mine that form an integral part of the research.

I have attempted to open up the field of experimental film practice and the technologies it uses in an accessible way, and have included information on some basic techniques and terms in the footnotes when these first appear in the text.

NOTES

1. Deleuze, Gilles. 1989. *Cinema 2 TheTime-Image*, Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 215.
2. This is a non-standard punctuation mark, consisting of a superimposed question mark on an exclamation mark.
3. In the sixties, French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss appropriated the word “Bricolage” from the French verb “bricoler,” meaning “to tinker”. Lévi-Strauss describes how the “bricoleurs” expression depends on his reappropriation of “a collection of oddments left over from human enterprises”. Lévi-Strauss argues that placing the materials in a new context can alter their meaning, suggesting that as a methodology. See: Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 19.

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Score for *Arnulf Rainer* (1958–1960) by Peter Kubelka. By permission of Peter Kubelka.

I

FILM ART

“The evolution of the medium will depend on the purposes we find for it. The medium has no secret purpose of its own.”

NÖEL CARROLL¹

“The whole of the 20th century, the idea of manipulating the physiological relationship of the audience to the film was never actually a negotiated topic, and the idea that you would make an film that would be organized around the principle that you would feel disrespectful of the film, in an organized and predicted way, was just knocked of the charts.”

TONY CONRAD²

Experimental Film Praxis

Scholar and filmmaker Edward Small argues that while experimental films both “suffer and enjoy a marginal position throughout the history of film/video scholarship”³ they coalesce to form a highly significant genre providing “an especially heuristic vantage from which to question a number of critical concepts that have marked the history of film/video scholarship.”⁴ Thus, Small sees experimental film’s marginality as a good place to “examine and interrogate”⁵ established critical concepts of cinema and television. This double role of occupying the boundary of two different fields – artistic and academic – has provided possibilities for valuable artistic independence.

Experimental film has developed simultaneously as an alternative to mainstream cinema and as a new medium within the realms of fine art. Fundamental to its identity is a commitment to a continual re-examination and investigation of its own medium, and, by extension,

the cultural and technical history of cinema. This kind of deciphering of itself bears continuously new and critical cultural activities that evoke new meanings and new understandings.

The history of cinema is, in part, a history of control and power – it emerged as a new way to make money and as a propaganda tool. Those who controlled the technology, the distribution and the content, also controlled how films were looked at – and understood. This question of controlling the media one is working with is obvious for the artist, be it printed text, the canvas or a photographic medium.

In the sixties, as artist, curator and theoretician Peter Weibel has pointed out, experimental film was very aware of being a new medium and a new art form, and not just an extension of the visual arts. According to Weibel, this awareness leads to a “complete deconstruction of classical cinema. The apparatus of classical cinema, from the camera to the projector, from the screen to the celluloid, was radically transformed, annihilated, and expanded.”⁶

Specific Medium

The ontology of the film medium is currently a hot topic. There are two distinctive viewpoints to the question of what the medium itself means to the art of film or cinema and what the future should or could be. The first sees inherent, valuable qualities in the medium that justify the need to keep the analogue medium alive. The other looks more to the future, and sees film as an archaic medium. This view holds that digital media should be embraced and advanced, rather than analogue media kept alive artificially.

In the realms of experimental film practice the questions circle around the concept of film’s materiality. Can a film work addressing medium specificity be presented digitally? Is it the same work, or a mere simulation of it? Such screenings, while possible – and increasingly common – are arguably limited.

There are multitudes of film artists showing their medium specific works both on film and digitally, with no apparent contradiction. At the same time, some artists refuse that their works to be shown in any form other than film. This situation is evolving rapidly, with digital technology gaining in accessibility, affordability, and quality and making and exhibiting film in rapid decline.

According to Tess Leina Takahashi, a significant portion of contemporary experimental film can be seen to be devoted to “the medium of film in its specificity.”⁷ However, unlike earlier work that explored the medium per se, Takahashi further suggests that the recent works explore film’s medium specificity in the age of digital technology in a way that is reminiscent of the questions that the emergence of video art brought into the field in the 1960s and 1970s. Takahashi sees this movement responding to the digital by reclaiming “film’s specificity as singular, natural, old-fashioned, and one-of-a-kind in its attention to the “craft” of filmmaking.”⁸

For filmmaker and scholar David N. Rodowick on the other hand, film is completely historical and no longer a modern medium.⁹ He suggests that the medium should not be considered as ““material” in any literal or simple sense”¹⁰ only and he advocates a broader definition that acknowledges wider ontological, phenomenological, material, and discursive dimensions: “We need to go beyond a formal definition and try to understand how a medium is not simply a passive material or substance; it is equally form, concept, or idea. Or, more provocatively, a medium is a terrain where works of art establish their modes of existence, and pose questions of existence to us.”¹¹

These two views on technology and modes of art practice are linked to a vast array of questions concerning the relationship between medium and artist that are frequently linked to conceptions of subjective feeling, established practice, knowledge, nostalgia, and prejudice. Before looking at the practice of experimental film more closely, a brief detour to the ideas behind the concept of structuralist film is useful at this point, as structuralist film is considered to be the pinnacle of the explorations into medium specificity in experimental film.

Cinema of Structure

Since the 1950s, Austrian film artist Peter Kubelka has been responsible for some uncompromising explorations into the essence of cinema through his rigorously structured “metric films”¹² which laid the foundations of structural cinema. For instance, in making *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), which consists of alternations between completely transparent film and completely black film, Kubelka sought to “get to the absolute basis of my medium, and to handle it as purely as was possible”.¹³

The label *Structuralist film*¹⁴ was ultimately coined in 1969 by American critic P. Adams Sitney to describe works by a group of North American filmmakers, including Michael Snow, Tony Conrad, Ernie Gehr and Paul Sharits.¹⁵ Sitney saw a “cinema of structure”¹⁶ emerging out of the increasingly complex forms found in experimental film. For Sitney, structuralist film insists on its shape and “what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline.”¹⁷ Sitney names four typical technical characteristics of structural film: fixed camera position, the flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography from a screen. For him structural film is static “because it is not modulated internally by evolutionary concerns. Generally, there are not climaxes in these films. They are visual or audio-visual objects whose most striking characteristic is their over-all shape.”¹⁸ Sitney’s lengthy text was seminal in two ways: it sparked a heated and long lasting discussion about who does, what is and how to define structuralist film. Secondly, it gave a name, however problematic, to a specific critical strand of experimental filmmaking.

For critic Scott MacDonald one of the primary aims of structural film was to “transform explorations of fundamental elements of the cinematic apparatus into aesthetic experiences.”¹⁹ MacDonald also claims that Sitney’s discussion of structural filmmakers overlooks the essential aspect that film was a collaborative medium in both production and presentation: “Understood this way, structural film can be seen as part of the larger social and political context of that period, during which the fundamental structures of a good many traditional elements of American culture and society were being reexamined.”²⁰