

Experiments of the 90s: a Generation of Anthology Film Archives

by Andrew Lampert and Ed Halter

The 1990s saw an unprecedented boom in American independent film production at all levels, giving rise to “Indiewood” (i.e., independent Hollywood) feature-film production supported and exhibited by a new, high-profile film festival network. A proliferation of alternative means of distribution (cable television, home video, urban art-house multiplexes and the internet) has also benefited the independent feature-film industry, although many films are made and never distributed. Those films that receive theatrical release often play alongside traditional Hollywood product. Despite all of this big business, the filmmakers in program number four are more likely to crop up in the audience of an “Indiewood” film rather than at the helm of one.

In many ways, experimental film in the 90s has both reacted to and benefited from this new, cinema-saturated environment. Some experimental filmmakers (such as Sadie Benning, Jem Cohen, Craig Baldwin and Todd Haynes) have found fruitful ways to engage with this highly commercialized, career-oriented and media-savvy culture. At the same time, other avant-gardists have rejected the mainstream even more vehemently, producing work that, in both style, construction, format and content, is decidedly at odds with the greater indie-world. The filmmakers represented here all work under the radar of popular independent film culture. For them, distribution pretty much means being present at a showing of their movies, and the idea of making money off their labor is less a goal than a dream. These artists are not avant-garde because they work in isolation and only rarely exhibit their films, but because it is their goal to visualize what they have never seen before.

Today, an emerging filmmaker working in any style has more access than ever before to equipment, training, and most importantly, a community. Traditionally, avant-garde filmmakers have primarily produced and presented their works for an in-the-know circle of fellow artists and aficionados. There are exceptions to this, of course, though in general, experimental filmmakers tend to screen at the same venues and often attend one another’s shows (since, after all, there are a limited number of spaces that screen experimental films). Still, the recently renewed interest in experimental cinema has only served to enlarge this community, and while it would be unfair to bestow it with a name or label, a la the Nouvelle Vague or New American Cinema, one could say that they function as more of a social society than a movement.

This very personal selection of films and directors reflects the D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself) trend in the 90s avant-garde by showcasing works by a loosely connected group of artists in the downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn scene. The majority of these artists live in New York, with the exception of Luis Recoder, Stephanie Barber and Martha Colburn. But, interestingly enough, none of them are native New Yorkers. Many are originally from outside the US, coming from such diverse locales as Lithuania (Ziz, Varkalis), Ireland (Tierney, Murray), France (Boue), Russia (Godovannaya) and Japan (Sogo). Most have worked together, and in some cases shared lofts and equipment. Almost half are curators and frequently tend to program each other’s works. A few are even teachers, and nearly all attended art school (although, they did not necessarily study film). For those in New York, Anthology Film Archives and weekly screening series like the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema (operated by Frye and Eros) provide a regular meeting ground and theatrical showcase. Likewise, at some point almost all of the NY-based filmmakers have exhibited or worked at Anthology, either on the payroll or as a volunteer.

These filmmakers are not highly publicized and are, on the whole, barely known or screened outside their own circuit, however in recent years many have been included in museum surveys of super-8mm and avant-garde work at institutions like MOMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Pacific Film Archive. Martha Colburn has even shown at the Sundance Film Festival, which is essentially the film festival circuit equivalent of winning an Academy Award. From structural deconstructions to psychedelic phantasmagorias, the stylistic methods utilized by each of these filmmakers firmly places them within a tradition, and, at the same time, allows us to see how each individual approaches their art from a different angle.

Working with self-funded ultra-low budgets, these artists have some technical aspects in common. All employ outdated smaller gauges (8mm, Super-8mm and 16mm) and rarely use video. They edit in their own lofts instead of commercial editing houses, using the techniques and editing equipment of the pre-digital age. Visual effects are created using the barest means possible, with editing in camera, rephotography of images off screens or televisions, filter and lens tricks, scratching and painting directly on the film, and optical printing being a few of their main resources. Filmmakers such as McClure and

Recoder integrate aspects of performance into their work, meaning that they physically manipulate the work as it is projected.

Many of them construct their films from stock footage or from images they find in old movies in their collection (or, in the case of Ziz, from what he finds in trash bins and on shelves at Anthology). It therefore seems natural that so many of these works are collages. A filmmaker who cannot afford to shoot and develop stock can still fashion a personal statement out of found images. Furthermore, hand-developing at home has also become increasingly popular. A good deal of the directors concoct films meant to be seen silent or else with live soundtracks. In this way, their films have a hand-made quality, and even the contemporary films of Liotta and Sogo still possess an antiquated air.

Aesthetically, the works are extremely diverse, but some common trends should be noted. Unlike previous generations of structural filmmakers or the current directions in video art, this group do not heavily concern themselves with theoretical or overarching philosophical and political themes. Their super-outsider stance has influenced what Recoder has termed "cine povera," a sense of beauty born of a poverty of means. Primary artistic concerns are the graphic qualities of the film stock itself, the plasticity of visual composition through homemade processes, and the silently musical effects of editing rhythms.

One could argue the similarities and differences commonly held by these artists at great length but, since space is limited, it is crucial to note how each filmmaker uniquely elaborates and synthesizes the, by now, codified formal and theoretical languages of prior waves of the avant-garde. A sharp attention to details and a deep knowledge of the evolution of cinema, along with a true dedication to experimental filmmaking, are the only bonds that link these filmmakers. Whether you feel it in the scratched and hand-painted films of Varkalis or in the mythical allusions of Eros and Liotta, the viewer immediately senses how the filmmakers descend from a shared lineage, how they attempt to engage the audience in a dialogue and how they simply need to express themselves in this abstract manner. This is undoubtedly a "small cinema" in terms of format, outlook and aspirations, yet sometimes, the smallest experiences create moments of profundity.