
Three Publications on Experimental Cinema

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Albera, François. *L'Avant-garde au cinéma*, Paris : Armand Colin, 2005, (Cinéma)

Haas, Patrick de. *Andy Warhol : le cinéma comme « braille mental » = The Cinema as « mental braille »*, Paris : Paris expérimental, 2005, (Les Cahiers de Paris expérimental ; 21)

Les 20 ans de Paris Expérimental : 1985-2005, Paris : Paris expérimental, 2005, (Les Cahiers de Paris expérimental ; 20)

- 1 One singular thing about experimental cinema is that it cannot be reduced to the simple making of films. Its filmmakers are often its most fervent advocates, through a whole range of activities that go from criticism to programming via publishing and teaching. One of the characteristics of this milieu is that it is constantly redefining itself in accordance with the artistic and social context in which it operates. The accessibility and visibility of the works constituting this field are therefore decisive. Three new books illustrate the different approaches to this practice, from the viewpoints, respectively, of the filmmakers, the works and the theory.
- 2 Two of them are from Editions Paris expérimental, a publishing house set up by the filmmaker Christian Lebrat in the 1980s. The first comprises three interviews, and celebrates the process he inaugurated at a time when publications of critical texts or texts by filmmakers were a rarity in France. It looks back over and celebrates the adventures of this publishing house founded by Lebrat twenty years ago. It also includes a set of documents and summaries of events and publications organised by Paris expérimental. It shows the publisher's commitment and perseverance in its project of publishing classic and contemporary texts in this field. The book by Patrick de Haas is an

expanded edition of an article he published in 1989 in *Andy Warhol, cinéma*, entitled “Vider la vue” (Emptying Sight).¹ In this essay, de Haas analyses the complex relation of Andy Warhol’s work to the cinema, whatever the medium he was using. He judiciously observes that cinema “is a principle which underlines the fact that, from now on, a thing, an event or a human being exists only through the image.” The article concentrates on Warhol’s filmmaking, with its vision of movies, in the artist’s own words, as “mental Braille.”² It is on the surface that Warhol’s films are seen and read, and this emphasis on surface is accompanied by a proliferation of images in series, which in turn are understood as repetition. This repetition underscores every difference, from one frame to the next, from one star to another. The films accumulate just like the silkscreens, and the interpretation machine works overtime. This proliferation of images is such that it is not possible to deal here with sissyness, camp, or homosexuality, which inform cinema in a different way.

- 3 François Albera’s book sets out to consider avant-garde cinema in relation to its conditions of possibility, that is to say, in accordance with its appearance and its grounding in modernity. What is cinema’s relation to the avant-garde? How has our understanding of the avant-garde in cinema moved away from the political and social foundation that it had in other artistic fields? Thus, the question of the avant-garde in cinema is compounded by that of the actual existence of avant-garde cinema. These considerations apply to the situation of the avant-gardes as much as to French avant-garde cinema. Once the question has been raised in these historically justified terms, the practice of experimental cinema, as it emerged in the United States in the 1940s, going on to become the New American Cinema and underground cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, will be, so to speak, disqualified. The debates over the notion of the amateur that animated the world of cinema in the US are very useful when it comes to looking at the articulation of experimentation and militancy.³ This notion does not meet the criteria favoured by Albera, which correspond to a practice that is, by its heritage, grounded in debates over the articulation of the definition of an avant-garde movement in France. Frequently reiterates the separation between the avant-garde and politics that was transcended by the Lettristes and renewed by Situationism, whose influence on the films of Jean-Luc Godard he rightly insists on. “Whatever the number of films that might seem fit for inclusion in the experimental or avant-garde corpus, the avant-garde position is, precisely, not to accept exclusion or marginalisation, not to accept being placed in the underground, unless with a view to escaping it, not to rest content with small numbers or to assert an ultra-artisticness, or to place one’s subversiveness on the level of form.”(p. 10)
- 4 This book by Albera revisits some of the arguments put forward by Peter Wollen on the existence and relations of two avant-gardes⁴ and by Guy Hennebelle and Raphaël Bassan in their special publication on avant-garde cinema,⁵ but within his own rigorous historical research. This transversal approach brings a new energy to this field of study and puts its finger on a theoretical haziness regarding the understanding of avant-garde cinema. Albera sets out to resituate the bases of the debate, and in doing so challenges a number of beliefs. In a word, he introduces a bit of movement and fresh air into a field that has tended to cling to its historic interpretations. Readers may however regret that he makes hardly any references to the filmmakers’ cooperatives of the 1970s, or to the laboratory movement of the 1990s, in relation to experimental cinema. When it comes to considering contemporary cinema, the historical approach is lagging behind.

NOTES

1. "Vider la vue," *Andy Warhol, cinéma*, ed. Bernard Blistène and Jean-Michel Bouhours, Paris: Centre Pompidou/Carré, 1989.
2. "I see everything like that, the surface of things, a kind of mental Braille, I just pass my hands over the surface of things," "Nothing To Lose," interview with Gtechen Berg, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, May 1967.
3. On these relations between activist cinema and experimental cinema in relation to the idea of the amateur, see: David James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.
4. Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," *Studio International*, vol. 190, #978, November-December 1975.
5. "Cinéma d'avant-garde (expérimental et militant)," ed. Guy Hennebelle and Raphaël Bassan, *CinémAction*, #10-11, 1980.