



The Palgrave Handbook of Experimental Cinema

Edited by

Kim Knowles · Jonathan Walley

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Introduction

Kim Knowles and Jonathan Walley

The Palgrave Handbook of Experimental Cinema is a collection of newly commissioned essays by both established and emerging scholars, intended to map out the current landscape of experimental cinema studies and set agendas for future work in the field. At a critical juncture in the discipline of film studies, where the proliferation of digital media has thrown into question the ontological contours of film as an object of study, not to mention the very nature of cinema itself compared to a growing number of other moving image forms, it is crucial to reassess and reassert experimental cinema as a site of formal exploration and interrogation as well as resistance to institutional, political, and social norms. Experimental cinema has always, by its very definition, been these things; this collection, in assessing new directions in thinking about experimental film as a growing subfield of cinema studies, seeks to articulate what it means to be these things in the contemporary moment.

Compared to the plethora of publications on gallery installation and artists' moving image, the broad field of experimental cinema, as overlapping with but in many ways distinct from these other moving image forms, has received comparatively little attention. The past fifteen to twenty years, however, and especially the last decade, have seen a surge of new scholarship on experimental

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cinema, attesting to the ongoing relevance of its historical and contemporary forms and opening up a vital dialogue between the various manifestations of cinema- and gallery-based moving image practice. Such scholarship has also raised the profile of experimental cinema studies within cinema studies more broadly, where it has enjoyed more attention and publication activity in the new millennium than at any other time since the 1970s.

This volume of essays does not propose an exhaustive overview of all the aesthetic and theoretical developments of recent years but offers some avenues into current debates and enduring concerns. It is not intended as an introduction to experimental film or experimental film scholarship, or as an encyclopedic collection dutifully addressing historical periods, nations and regions, major figures, and all key theoretical, historical, or critical preoccupations of past or present. Its defining concern could be summarized in the question, “where is experimental cinema studies going?” The authors whose work appears herein were invited to test new waters, to take the opportunity to pursue projects they had not otherwise been able to pursue before, and to stake out new interests for themselves and new territories for the field. Thus, many of the chapters read as interventions, addressing gaps, blind spots, or other limitations of that field. Many explore new scholarly or writerly methodologies, introduce new theoretical and historical frames of reference, or bring needed attention to previously overlooked artists, national and regional cinemas, or critical themes. Some familiar approaches—psychoanalytic theory, Marxist criticism, medium specificity, close reading—are updated, often by being brought into contact with more current critical ideas like postcolonialism, new materialism, ecocriticism, intermediality, and theories of embodiment.

A frequent topic of discussion as we assembled this volume was how to refer to its subject, whether to call it “experimental,” “avant-garde,” or “underground,” and how specific to be about its medium: whether to call it “film,” “cinema,” or “the moving image.” We engaged in some hand wringing over these questions because, as anyone who studies the subject well knows, nobody has ever been particularly happy with any of the designations on offer. One objection to the term “experimental” is its connotation that the films are “science films,” or else the results of sober methodological plodding rather than the sort of activity we normally associate with artmaking (and offer a similarly cold experience to the viewer). This association could further imply that the films are somehow quantifiable and, even less appealing, repeatable, as real scientific experiments are supposed to be. Experiments in the scientific sense are part of the thankless quotidian work that slowly, in tiny increments, contributes to epistemic progress; experimental films, and artworks in general, are thought of in completely opposite terms.

The implication of science in the term “experimental” might also raise the hackles of artists and academics who wish to distance themselves either from some of the more harmful endeavors science has served, or who are broadly skeptical about science *in toto*, as many academics in the arts and

humanities have historically been. Science, according to one position that has been popular in the academy, flattens out cultural difference and ignores socio-historical relativity in its positivist pursuit of pan-historical “truth,” its presumed objectivity masking its service to ideology.¹ Fortunately this position, which conflates a realistic faith in science with an unquestioning “scientism,” is less prominent in the academy than it once was, especially as a new wave of anti-science sentiment has appeared in the far right’s appalling and dangerous assault on scientific fact and expertise. Nonetheless, the notion of art as science, or at least of an analogy between the two, still runs against the grain of our widely shared perceptions of art as individualistic, imaginative, sometimes irrational, and aimed at a very different part of our brains than science.

The resistance to science, whether overtly asserted or just tacitly held, has not, however, stopped many “experimental” filmmakers from explicitly linking their work with, or describing it as, science. The sciences have directly shaped the work of filmmakers from Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, the Surrealists, and Paul Sharits (psychology) to Maya Deren, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Kathryn Ramey (anthropology and ethnography), from Tony Conrad (mathematics and linguistics) to Hollis Frampton, Stan Vanderbeek, and Louise Schwartz (computer science). The current generation of filmmakers who craft their own emulsions, invent their own film processing methods, and hand-process their own films have developed deep knowledge of chemistry and botany. On the other hand, with occasional exceptions, experimental cinema studies has generally not embraced the sciences, especially not to the degree scholars of other cinemas have; these latter scholars have drawn heavily upon psychology and neurology, particularly in the last three decades, while scientists in those fields have paid more and more attention to cinema in their studies of visual perception, cognition, and emotion. As several of the contributions to this volume attest, cultivating scientific knowledge (not to mention a heightened perception of the natural world more generally) alongside artistic craft is increasingly necessary in light of impending ecological catastrophe.

If one objection to the term “experimental” is that it is too cold, that it smacks too much of objective methodology rather than artmaking, another

¹ The anti-science bent of academics in cinema studies was on view most prominently during the emergence of cognitive film theory in the 1980s and 1990s. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, the two most prominent figures of the cognitive turn, have critiqued the intense skepticism of science among film scholars; see David Bordwell, “A Case for Cognitivism,” *Iris* 9 (Spring 1989), 11–40, esp. 16–17, and “Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory,” in Noël Carroll and David Bordwell, eds., *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 3–26, esp. 13–14 and 24–25; Noël Carroll, “Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment,” in *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 357–400, esp. 382–385. Bordwell and Carroll cite numerous instances of anti-science sentiment among fellow film scholars. For a more recent, and more moderate, example of such skepticism, see David Ingram, “Cognitivist Film Theory and the Bioculturalist Turn in Eco-film Studies,” in Hannes Bergthaller and Peter Mortensen, eds., *Framing the Environmental Humanities* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 190–204.

objection is more or less the opposite: that “experimental” sounds too wishy-washy, tentative, or lacking seriousness or commitment (this will likely resonate with those of us who teach art making or scholarship at colleges and universities, where STEM education is taken seriously and the arts are often perceived as merely extracurricular). As Peter Kubelka once put it, “I am busy experimenting on the shooting floor and during the editing process. What you saw now was a completed piece of visual art not an experiment or an experimental film.”² “Experimental films,” by this reasoning, are merely attempts rather than genuine artistic objects—notes, exercises, or practice runs at “real” cinema, an association made all the more unpalatable given mainstream moving image culture’s perpetual poaching of experimental cinema’s formal innovations, as if the latter serves as a Research and Development department for the former.

Of course, objections have also been raised about other labels, such as “avant-garde” (too pretentious, too historically specific) and “underground” (also too historically narrow, and perhaps a bit ironic given this cinema’s close historical relationship to institutions of higher education). We do not believe, however, that anyone who ever objected to the label “experimental,” or for that matter any label, did not also acknowledge that this cinema, whatever we might call it, exists in the first place: that it is indeed a tradition, more or less unified across time and space, defined by shared interests, institutions, “others” (mainstream commercial cinema, for instance), and a core of major works, artists, and critical accounts, not to mention key events and institutions. We have chosen “experimental” for the title of this collection because it remains the most commonly used term in the discourses of artists and scholars today, because numerous artists self-identify as “experimental filmmakers,” and because the alternatives, to our thinking, miss the mark.

What “experimental” really designates is not the qualities of the films themselves (i.e., scientific and rigorous, or tentative and exploratory) but what has been called a mode of cinematic practice, or what could be called a little less prosaically a film culture.³ Such a mode or culture is not defined solely by the internal aesthetic features of its artworks, or only negatively in terms of its differences from other cinematic modes, but by the broader historically bound institutions, distribution and exhibition practices, spectatorial roles and routines, interpretive or other critical discourses, and the position

² Variations of Kubelka’s statement abound. This one comes from Sandro Vakhtangov, “Two Words on Video Art,” in Ana Gabelaia, Mariam Loria, and Nikoloz Nadirashvili, *Video Art Laboratory: About Georgian Video Art* (Tbilisi, Apollon Kutateladze Tbilisi State Academy of Art Curators’ Lab, 2014), 96.

³ On the concept of a “mode of film practice,” see David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. xiv. On experimental cinema specifically, see Jonathan Walley, “Modes of Film Practice in the Avant-Garde,” in Tanya Leighton, ed., *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 182–199, and *Cinema Expanded: Avant-Garde Film in the Age of Intermedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 27–29.

of the filmmaker within all of these. Experimental film culture's artists are genuinely "authors" in ways that their "*auteur*" counterparts in more mainstream film are not. "*Auteur*" is an abstraction that glosses over the fact that popular cinemas are defined by a division of labor that can reach granular proportions. Experimental filmmakers frequently work alone, in what Edward Small has called a "radically acollaborative" mode, entirely responsible for all facets of making, often presenting their own work in person at screenings, even fashioning their own emulsions, or moving image instruments (cameras, projectors, and other mechanisms of exhibition).⁴ It is arguable that, in seeking to starkly contrast experimental cinema with commercial filmmaking, Small overstated the total autonomy of the experimental filmmaker, glossing a more complicated truth of multiple forms of collaboration. For instance, the informal infrastructures that sustain experimental filmmaking, such as the international artist-run film lab community, demonstrate the extent to which mutual support and skills-sharing have characterized experimental film production, albeit replacing the more institutionalized and monetized frameworks of collaboration that one finds in the commercial film industry.

Even accepting the "acollaborative" nature of experimental film production, experimental cinema is nonetheless, one could argue, the only truly collective and participatory cinema, a film culture comprised of an international network of individuals and small institutions (e.g., microcinemas and university film departments), wherein filmmakers, critics, and audiences can genuinely know each other and interact, in which we can be part of an event rather than a mere witness to one taking place on the "elsewhere" of the screen. During COVID-19, the common lament made by participants in experimental film events relegated to the Zoom-sphere was the loss of the sense of community so central to the tradition, and which takes on new meaning in an historical moment in which people are hyper-focused on themselves, turned inward to the echo chambers of social media and increasingly incapable, it seems, of dealing with one another.

The heightened engagement, of connectedness, among filmmaker, viewer, medium, and space extends into the realm of film criticism and scholarship. Traditional hierarchical distinctions break down; across the history of experimental cinema, filmmakers have been important critics, theorists, and historians; their writings collected in books, printed in scholarly journals, and frequently framing screenings of their work in the form of program notes. Roughly a third of this volume's contributors are filmmakers. And academic film scholars—the editors of this volume among them—enjoy a closer relationship to their artist subjects because these subjects are not movie celebrities. They are not separate from the other participants in their cinema culture as famous directors are, ensconced in and mystified by an entirely separate movie metaculture of mass media fame and cultural prestige. The words of famous

⁴ Edward S. Small, *Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), 25.

auteurs—Hitchcock, Godard, Scorsese—appear in print from time to time, and can be articulate, historically well informed, and thus useful as scholarly resources. But these words come to the public from “on high,” and are seen as special occasions, rare glimpses into the mind of the great director, which speaks to the entirely unidirectional relationship between maker and audience in mainstream cinema. Experimental film culture is a collaboration of all its participants, with scholars frequently forming partnerships—formal or informal—with makers, their writings a living part of the tradition rather than an adjunct to it (as academic film scholarship is to mainstream narrative cinema). The majority of contributions to this book reflect this, as is evidenced by the number of footnotes referencing “correspondences” with the filmmakers under discussion. More than a communication by letters or emails, a correspondence is a relationship of congruence, harmony, or agreement, a relationship not characterized by hierarchy. Ironically, then, the least popular cinema is also the most populist.

Thus while experimental films are famously heterogeneous aesthetically, and cannot therefore be reduced to something like a genre, they share an ethic. Experimental filmmakers, whether they self-identify as such or not, live this ethic and participate in the culture that embodies it. Central to that ethic, and all the more important considering the contemporary media landscape, is a resistance to the facile and uncritical consumption of moving image media, and the unwitting and passive acceptance of the very modes of such consumption, which are given to us by corporate producers of moving image technologies and commercial film and video products. This resistance takes place not only within the four corners of the screen (or multiple screens, or gallery spaces, etc.), but also in the form of the very conditions and institutions of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception that define the contours of experimental film culture, which have been forged and are maintained by filmmakers, critics and scholars, film programmers, curators, and educators.

Experimental “film,” “cinema,” or “moving images?” We have chosen “cinema” over “film” for this book’s title to distinguish our subject from a specific medium, and over “moving images” to distinguish it from a much wider range of artforms and practices. In the current discursive landscape of moving image media in both the art world and the public sphere, these distinctions are important, despite the claims by some critics that we can simply forget them.⁵ Our reference to experimental “cinema” rather than “film” should not be mistaken for an assertion that the physical medium in which “films” (or, shall we say, “instances of cinema”) are made is unimportant. Experimental cinema’s alterity, today especially, is in part in its continued commitment to the specificity of media and, concomitantly, to the sort of intimate relationship of empathy with and deep knowledge of a medium’s properties and possibilities.

⁵ For a case in point, see Noël Carroll, “Forget the Medium!,” in *Engaging the Moving Image*. For a particularly articulate counterargument, see Murray Smith, “My Dinner with Noël; or, Can We Forget the Medium?” *Film Studies* 8 (Summer 2006), 140–148.

Experimental filmmakers' ongoing use of analog—"celluloid"—film has been dismissed as merely fetishism or nostalgia, two words etymologically linked to mental and physical illness and false belief (and in the case of fetishism, perversion). But in the modern media environment, to ignore media specificity or be apathetic to the way media technologies work is to abdicate the role of user for the role of used. The continued emphasis of media specificity, rather than a quaint idiosyncrasy of experimental film (at best) or a pointless exercise in obscurantism (at worst), is, in fact, a model for living with the media technologies that pervade our lives, and for integrating or "assimilating" them into more mindful, progressive, and meaningful artistic practices.⁶

Less specific than "film," "cinema" is nonetheless more specific than "moving images," naming a tradition distinct from video art, television, multimedia practices, "moving image art," or "artists' film and video." Of course, this is more an assertion of belief than fact, staking a claim with historical and political implications rather than merely pointing out, objectively, how things are in the contemporary moving image media environment. We fully recognize that "cinema" is ever more intertwined with television, which is itself ever more intertwined with the internet. We also recognize the numerous instances of overlap, intersection, and cross-pollination in the history of experimental cinema's relationship with the wider world of the arts, and particularly the gallery-based art world. But we also take cinema "writ large," as it were, as at least as proximate an artistic form and tradition for experimental cinema as the art world, even as that world has become saturated by moving images. The history of experimental cinema may have begun in the films of avant-garde painters, sculptors, photographers, poets, and dancers extending their work into a new medium, but very often these film-artists positioned their work as much *against* the recently crystalized standard of mass-produced, popular narrative film as within the various art "isms" they represented. Insofar as experimental film was conceived as an "other" to this dominant norm, it was conceived of as—and has remained—an "other" *cinema*. And it has tended, even into the contemporary moment, to reflect—albeit in a cracked glass—the distribution and exhibition routines of more conventional cinema (i.e., Hollywood, the international art/festival cinema from Agnès Varda or Michelangelo Antonioni through Apichatpong Weerasethakul or Wang Bing). That experimental cinema's home has remained the microcinema, cinematheque, film festival, and even the DVD rather than the gallery and the financially inaccessible limited-edition is another sign of this affinity between experimental cinema and cinema in general, even if that affinity is also marked by tension.

By and large, then, this volume's focus is upon film and video work by filmmakers who explicitly or otherwise align themselves with the tradition of

⁶ Our use of the word "assimilating" is a nod to Federico Windhausen's "Assimilating Video," *October* 137 (Summer 2011), 69–83. In this essay Windhausen demonstrates how a commitment to the idea of medium specificity has shaped the use of digital video by experimental filmmakers long associated with celluloid purism (e.g., Ernie Gehr).

experimental cinema, taking up and expanding upon many of that tradition's major preoccupations and engaging with its historical discourses. Some of the filmmakers represented here—as both subjects and authors—were art school trained; some of them work or worked in art rather than “film” or “cinema” departments; many of them have worked in multiple media and artforms, and have exhibited in museums and galleries. Movement among different art worlds, however, does not entail the dissolution of those worlds, their convergence into a single moving image culture. While many contributions to this collection address “expanded” cinematic forms (including performative work and film or video installations), or track the careers of their filmmaker subjects through multiple artistic spaces, movements, or institutions, what emerges time and again are the aesthetic, theoretical, and historical concerns of experimental film culture, of the “filmmaker” specifically rather than the “artist” generally. In her introduction to the dialogue among leading experimental film scholars that she convened for this book, Johanna Gosse aptly summarizes both the interplay of experimental film with the wider art and media worlds and its autonomy as a cinematic tradition. After noting that each of her discussants “situates experimental film practice within a set of broader set of cultural contexts and practices,” Gosse writes,

Insofar as the subfield finds itself at a crucial historical turning point, shared across the humanities, in which dominant canons and hierarchies are being questioned, challenged and dismantled, it has also arrived at a new chapter in terms of institutional coherence and recognition. These thinkers have each played a key role in shaping revised understandings of the history of experimental film, as well as helping shepherd experimental film scholarship towards its current status as a legible and established field of study.⁷

The chapters that follow this discussion, which, along with this introduction, frames the collection, negotiate between this process of “questioning and challenging,” on the one hand, and, on the other, maintaining the “institutional coherence” and “legibility” of both experimental cinema and experimental cinema studies.

“Experimental film scholarship” could mean two things: scholarship in the subject of experimental film (opposed to commercial cinema or mainstream forms or documentary or animation, for instance) and scholarship that utilizes an experimental approach, adopting unconventional, non- or even anti-academic methodologies. Needless to say, this collection showcases the former, but also extends a long tradition of more “experimental” writerly and methodological approaches within the study of our subject, and indeed unique to it. Both the preponderance of important critical writing by artists and the more intimate relationship between filmmakers and scholars described above account for this characteristic of experimental cinema studies; in the latter

⁷ Johanna Gosse, Erika Balsom, Erica Levin, and Gregory Zinman, “Letters from the (Sub)Field: Canons, Institutions, Legacies and Horizons,” in this volume.

instance, the “translation,” so to speak, of artmaking into scholarly discourse retains a greater sensitivity to imaginative possibilities, or to the limitations placed by the conventions and strictures of academese on the writing of art. Several of the chapters collected here merge fiction and non-fiction, prose and poetic writing, or are dialogic, leaving visible to some degree the traces of correspondences and conversations that took place behind the scenes. Many are openly personal and diaristic. In organizing this collection, we have decided to place these two different sorts of writing—“experimental” and more traditional—side by side in each section rather than gathering all instances of the former into their own section. We hope this will better highlight not only contrasts but the relative strengths of each approach—the way each can productively shape our viewing and thinking of experimental cinema. We see this facet of the book less as partaking in the trend toward more public-facing, “para-academic” writing currently taking place in the sciences and humanities generally, and more as a statement unique to our subject: that experimental cinema calls out for more varied forms of study just as it offers more varied, idiosyncratic, and demanding experiences for its viewers.⁸

The Palgrave Handbook of Experimental Cinema is divided into six sections. Each of these is deliberately loose and porous, characterized as much by variation as theme, a fact signaled by the intentionally evocative section titles: “Form,” “Body,” and “Ecology,” for example. These announce the major themes of each section, though other thematic undercurrents or methodological affinities can be traced across the book. A number of chapters address national or regional cinemas that have been underrepresented in experimental film scholarship, including those of Central and South America, Japan, Australia, and Eastern Europe, (another chapter explores representations of indigenous culture in Canada). While not wanting to downplay the importance of the contributions these chapters make in bringing attention to marginalized or understudied cinemas, we also did not want to perpetuate a sense of “otherness” by grouping them in a single section; hence, they appear throughout the book. Experimental cinema is often thought of as an international community, but experimental film scholarship still has a very long way to go to fully recognize this. Indeed, this assertion of “community” can only be true if vital work being done across the globe is made visible in the discourses of that community, and incorporated into a canon that, to this day, remains predominantly white and Western.

⁸ The term “para-academic” is vexed, currently in use in both complimentary and pejorative forms in higher educational metadiscourse. While it can refer to either underemployed academics (e.g., adjunct professors) or university faculty in managerial or administrative roles, we use it here simply to refer to writing and public presentations by academics intended for a non-academic audience, sometimes referred to as “public facing scholarship.” For a fascinating discussion of one usage of the term specifically with reference to the arts, see Neil Mulholland, *Re-Imagining the Art School: Paragogy and Artistic Learning* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 61–71.

We wish to highlight three more thematic lines threaded through the different sections of this book, often woven together in individual chapters. The first is ongoing attention to aesthetic form and the close analysis thereof, which links much contemporary work in the field to classical theoretical writings from the silent era onwards. Experimental film studies has had its historical and institutional turns, parallel to the ones taken by the field of cinema studies in general.⁹ The structuralist and post-structuralist turns in the humanities (i.e., semiotics, psychoanalysis, and apparatus theory) had less impact on writing about experimental film than elsewhere in the cinema academy; the same is true of the subsequent pivot toward cognitivism and empirical science. Subjective experience—the perceptual and mental effects of experimental films—remains a central concern in our field, even if it does not invoke psychological research. Hence, ontology, perceptual experience, and aesthetics, the major foci of classical film theory, have remained prominent. This should not be surprising considering the centrality of artistic specificity and novel spectatorial experience in the experimental film tradition, and that experimental cinema’s aesthetics are the most visible barometer of its critical stance toward its mainstream others. Some of the earliest theoretical or philosophical writing on experimental cinema initiated a thematic line that continues to this day, and which is ultimately psychological, (even if the wariness of science described above has prevented experimental film scholarship from turning to empirical science of visual perception, or cognition and emotion). We can trace this line from the aims of the first filmic modernists, such as Fernand Leger, László Moholy-Nagy, the Surrealists, or the Soviet montage filmmakers, to use film to retrain vision and mentation. The thread is picked up by the likes of Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, and Paul Sharits, and persists today in, among other places, an experimental eco-cinema that seeks to alter our perception of the natural world and our place in it.

A second thematic line winding through this book is the continued investment in the materiality of cinematic media, especially film, where “film” stands for all the components of film as (analog) machine: camera, film stock, projector, and so on. This extends into close examinations of the craft practices of filmmakers, wherein the specificities of both the medium *and* its use by a particular artist create the ground for close analyses and readings. That is, whatever hermeneutic frameworks are brought to bear on a given film or artist’s body of work are coupled with attention to the details— in

⁹ David James is a key figure in experimental film scholarship’s institutional turn; see *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), and *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). For more recent examples, see John Powers, *Technology and the Making of Experimental Film Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), and Genevieve Yue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), among others.