

## 1920's avant-garde

In the transitional years from 1907 – 1917 American filmmakers deliberately moved away from what Tom Gunning called *the cinema of attractions* - a cinema with no narrative, a cinema about *showing, not telling* (Gunning, 1990, p. 57). During these years the polycentric shot films transformed into a cinema with more “increased use of editing and the decreased distance between camera and actors” (Pearson, 1997, p. 29)..Thus, focusing more on the narrative, and via close-ups of actors also creating a *star system* like never seen before in the cinema. The majority of such film companies were based in Europe, but in 1917 Hollywood was starting to take over, partly because of the disruption of the European industries due to the First World War. With Hollywood, to some degree because of Edison's *Motion Picture Patent Company*, also came rules for narratives and realism – actors would no longer be allowed to look into the camera as this was seen as “spoiling the realistic illusion of the cinema” (Gunning, 1990, p. 57).

During the transitional years “new theories of time and perception in art, as well as the popularity of cinema led artists to try and put ‘paintings in motion’ through the film medium” (Rees, 1999, p. 20)..As a counterpoint to the moneymaking Hollywood mainstream, the independent European avant-garde, or experimental film, was becoming an important phenomena in 1920's silent film. Encouraged by Louis Aragon in 1918 who stated “that cinema must have ‘a place in the avant-garde's preoccupations.” (Rees, 1997, p. 95). As a counterpoint, one might assume that the experimental European modernist filmmakers of the 1920's (avant-garde) were avoiding the classic narratives, which therefore could be seen as a return to a *cinema of attractions*. In my essay I will try to discuss whether or not this is a valid statement.

When talking about experimental cinema in general it is important to understand the meaning of the word *avant-garde*, which originates from the French military and indicates the army in the forefront. In art, and thus in *art film*, the *avant-garde* can be understood as those in the forefront of creative innovation – at the cutting edge of art. Being in the forefront of creative innovation also means to move away from the mainstream. In the case of 1920's *avant-garde* cinema, the influence of mainstream *high art* such as ballet, poetry, painting, sculpture, music, fashion and literature was present, but more important was a love, or fascination, for so called *low arts*, including the circus, vaudeville, Hollywood silent comedies and puppetry. As described in *Avant-garde Film: Forms, Themes and Passions*,“ thus in many ways the *avant-gardes* saw their role being both in opposition to high art and attempting to displace it, to become a new ‘high art’ so to speak.” (O’Pray, 2003, p. 8), There was a desire to find a place for cinema as an art form, “and to that end it explored the idea of a ‘pure cinema.’” (Ibid., p. 10). This was done by following the neo-impressionists’ claim that “a painting, before all else, is a flat surface covered with colour” (Rees, 1997, p.96), and thus seeing a film as a strip of transparent material before all else. Others worked towards a *pure cinema* by looking back on the primitive narrative mainstream before “it was sullied by realism.” (Ibid., p. 96).

Using both examples of *pure cinema* outlined above, I think there is great importance in regards to how the European experimental cinema can be seen, in part, as a return to a *cinema of attractions*. On one hand the *avant-garde* was borrowing from the *high art* mainstream classic narrative Hollywood, but at the same time working towards a cinema not sullied by realism with its three dogmas; anti-narrative, anti-realism and anti-entertainment. The *avant-garde* would not simply let

you sit down and be entertained like the classic narrative Hollywood did. It was not a story-driven cinema, nor was it trying to make you forget that you were watching a film and therefore not made simply to entertain. In other words, what the early avant-garde tried to create was a cinema of *showing, not telling*.

To be able to see the potential link between a *cinema of attractions* and 1920's European avant-garde cinema it is also very important to understand the difficulty of connecting avant-garde cinema as one unit. Modernist artists, such as painters, sculptors and photographers from "[...] art movements as Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, Expressionism, de Stijl and others co-existed at the same time..." (O'Pray, 2003, p.8), and they all had their own ideas about how to give cinema its place in the avant-garde – how to make cinema an art form. This obviously created a problem, as "there were countless views of what that 'art' should be" (Ibid., p. 11). I will try to work around this by looking at films of different genres from the 1920's experimental film.

As mentioned previously, the notion of *pure cinema* as having the ability to *show* something instead of letting people get sucked into a classic narrative film is very similar to the work of *the cinema of attractions*. Among the most obvious examples are probably the German abstract animations. When looking at *Rhythmus* (1921) by Hans Richter I see clear connections between this form of abstract animation and *the cinema of attractions*. It is hard to argue that a narrative is present in *Rhythmus*. Richter was very engaged in using music with cinema, and the film shows squares, triangles and rectangles changing size and shape, in time with the music, and, as a result making the plot of the film to *show* us how music can be used in cinema instead of *telling* us a story. In the film *Coeur Fidèle / The Faithful Heart*

(1923), by Jean Epstein, we also see a connection to the cinema of attractions – the opening scene of fireworks in a long shot is indisputably *showing* us the fireworks rather than *telling* a story. Similarly, the same can be seen in the shot from the merry-go-round, which can be analyzed as a 1920's *phantom ride* – it is showing us a new and exciting way to use camera movement. Even though there are suggestions of a narrative in this scene, shown through the facial expressions of the actors, there are clear connections to a *cinema of attractions*. Furthermore, “[...] Epstein, Gance and others were very much influenced by early modernism and can be seen to be the first group of film-makers to explore the film as a means of representation and not simply as a medium of storytelling” (O’Pray, 2003, p. 10).

The narrative avant-garde cinema, or *art film*, is more difficult to link to a *cinema of attractions* than the abstract animations by Richter. However, I do think it is still possible to some extent. One example could be *Ballet Mecanique* (1924) by Fernand Léger, likewise, *Coeur Fidèle* also has traces of a *cinema of attractions*. For example, the 18 second long opening shot where we see a woman on a swing in a mid shot. Here Léger is playing around with the movement in the picture and thus *showing* a movement rather than *telling* a story. More importantly to this film in regards to the earliest silent films is the adoration of modernity, which often is shown in this film as a machine.

In 1929 Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí made *Un Chien Andalou / An Andalusian Dog*, probably the most famous narrative avant-garde film ever made. It is very hard to argue that this has many connections to a *cinema of attractions* as Buñuel and Dalí embrace the classic narrative Hollywood. In this film one sequence quite early shows a man stepping out on a balcony. It starts with a long shot of the man on the balcony

and then cuts into a close-up, the man looks up in the sky and the sequence cuts to an image of the moon – a very classic narrative mechanism. In contrast to *Ballet Mechanique*, *Un Chien Andalou* actually suggests a narrative all the way through the film with intertitles like “Once upon a time” and “Eight years later” -, trying to make the spectator believe that he is watching a classic narrative film. Even though *Un Chien Andalou* is clearly playing around the idea of a narrative, we are still able to spot scenes where a *cinema of attractions* is present. Most obvious is the scene with the cow eye being cut open. This shot is an attraction as it, in a close up, is exhibiting itself very much like Tom Gunning argues that the *cinema of attractions* does. (Gunning, 1990).

In conclusion I would say that it is possible to argue that there is a clear connection between *the cinema of attractions* and the 1920's European experimental films. I think this is shown mostly in the German abstract animations, but as argued this is also present in many other films from the 1920's experimental cinema. A reason to why this is the case is probably that the artists viewed work towards *pure cinema* as a contrast to the narrative mainstream, which was bound by rules of how to create realism. When looking for a contrast to the mainstream Hollywood, it seems understandable to look back on the time before cinema was dominated by money, and through that finding the *pure cinema*.

Word Count [1556]

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