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### Avant-garde culture and media strategies: the networks and discourses of the European film avant-garde, 1919-39

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**Publication date**  
2005

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Hagener, M. (2005). *Avant-garde culture and media strategies: the networks and discourses of the European film avant-garde, 1919-39*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. in eigen beheer.

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## Epilogue: Bridging the Gaps, Connecting the Dots

*POTEMKIN ist ein großer, selten geglückter Film.[...] Dieser Film aber ist ideologisch ausbetoniert, richtig in allen Einzelheiten kalkuliert wie ein Brückenbogen. Je kräftiger die Schläge darauf niedersausen, desto schöner dröhnt er. Nur wer mit behandschuhten Fingerchen daran rüttelt, der hört und bewegt nichts.*  
Walter Benjamin (1927)<sup>1</sup>

Returning from this extensive tour of some of the features of the European avant-garde what remains to be done in the concluding remarks is to bridge the gap between the historiographic past and the current situation of film and media studies. By connecting some of the dots that are delineating the field I hope to fit this research into a bigger pattern and wider context of film history. It is via the detour of a history of film history that I want to approach the significance of my results beyond the narrow confines of the historical avant-garde.

When the international archivists of the *Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film* (FIAF), an organisation founded as a result of the functional differentiation of avant-garde energies in 1938 (as argued in chapter three), met in Brighton in 1978 to re-examine the early cinema of the years 1900–06 it was in a sober and serious spirit of study. They did not anticipate that this meeting would provide *the* decisive inspiration to the study of early cinema that still proves to be one of the most fruitful fields in film studies today. The following year, 1979, the FIAF conference took place in Lausanne and was devoted to a rediscovery of the international avant-garde of the interwar period. This time the spirits were exuberant, the atmosphere (self-)celebratory.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this meeting did not give rise to a revisionist consideration of the avant-garde in any way comparable to that of early cinema. Similar to the high hopes of La Sarraz in 1929, the Lausanne-meeting fifty years later seems to have been a departure leading nowhere. The classic approaches centred on the works of art and organised along biographical lines still prevail(ed). Why are the myths and legends connected to the film avant-garde so strong? Why did Lausanne fail where Brighton »succeeded« (if we can talk about failure and success in those terms)? One reason might be, as I suggested in the introduction, that the recycling of the style of the historical avant-garde by postmodern art in the 1980s, largely ignorant of the larger concerns of the revolutionary movements and social transformations, made a neutral perspective on the highly politicised 1920s and 1930s impossible. The artists and activists in the 1920s had to cope with a radically changed situation if compared to the situation in the years immediately preceding this time: the first appearance of a bipolar world

that overrode most other concerns until 1989. It was the breakdown of a binary world system that allowed a novel perspective on the historical avant-garde.

Yet, the avant-garde culture of the interbellum did not vanish or go completely underground, it shifted its terrain after World War Two. The energy flows that had ebbed between the cities of modernism and generated so much activity before World War Two shifted after 1945 from the imaginary axis Paris-Berlin-Moscow to the axis across the Atlantic, more specifically in the case of film, to the connection between New York and Paris. The United States were possibly the most avid receiver of European avant-garde culture of the interwar period: Hans Richter and Oskar Fischinger, Man Ray and George Pal, Marcel Duchamp and Alexander Hackenschmied (Hammid), René Clair and Jean Renoir, Luis Buñuel and Iris Barry, Siegfried Kracauer and Jay Leyda – all these activists from an earlier period found temporarily or permanently refuge in the US. Through their work and legacy they planted the seeds that would grow and prosper into the independent or alternative movements that came into existence in different places in the United States, most notably in New York and San Francisco.

The history of *Cinema 16*, a New York based film society, is a case in point.<sup>3</sup> The club was established in 1947 by Amos Vogel, Austrian *émigré*, who followed the example set by the European networks in the interwar period. When Vogel started screening films which would not find an outlet elsewhere it was not with a long-running film club in mind. The success of his screenings soon developed into a membership society, the biggest of its kind in the United States in the 1950s. A magazine followed suit, as did a distribution network when the society opened chapters in different places. A sort of successor to this successful screening initiative was the New York Film Festival, the first of its kind in the US, which was founded and run by Vogel (with Richard Roud) from the 1960s onwards and which continues until today as an important showcase of alternative, independent and avant-garde cinema culture.<sup>4</sup> *Cinema 16* succeeded into building an audience which not only watched avant-garde films in the narrow sense of the work, but Vogel and his collaborators also screened educational, political, scientific and documentary films demonstrating once again the broad approach of avant-garde cinema culture. In fact, *Cinema 16* was killed by its own success as it paved the way for foreign arthouse movies onto American screens, as it helped to stir the first flames of the New American Cinema of the 1950s and 1960s which developed into the foundation on which the circuit of repertoire cinemas came to rest.

Another example to show the twisted energy streams of the interwar avant-garde is to point at some facets of the genealogy of film studies. One important figure of the London avant-garde screening circle Film Society was Iris Barry who relocated to New York in the early 1930s. New York increasingly became a major node for the traffic of ideas, people and institutional energy ever since the 1930s. Barry not only helped Siegfried Kracauer and Luis Buñuel at crucial moments in

their lives, she also found and hired Jay Leyda, another prodigal child of the European interwar avant-garde, who studied and worked with Eisenstein in the mid-1930s in the Soviet Union. Leyda, along with Annette Michelson, established the film studies department at New York University, one of the most influential worldwide, while also being instrumental in giving the field in general a better reputation through his history of the Russian cinema and his study of the compilation film.<sup>5</sup> Michelson, through her review *October*, aptly named after Eisenstein's revolutionary epos, was a decisive factor in bridging the gap between the European revolutionary art movements of the 1920s and 1930s and the postwar American avant-garde around Ken Jacobs and P. Adam Sitney, Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol. Here, the aforementioned Amos Vogel as well as another European émigré, Jonas Mekas, deserve at least brief mention as both were running important institutions for the circulation of the European avant-garde to a US audience. In at least two other respects *October* must be given credit for the dissemination of avant-garde energy: *October* partly inaugurated and greatly supported the revival of Soviet cinema and theory in an American academic context in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>6</sup> while also helping along the fledging study of early cinema. Not coincidentally then, three of Michelson's and Leyda's students at NYU have been at the forefront of this field that has been prospering in the last 25 years and that was »born« in Brighton in 1978. I am thinking here of Noël Burch, Tom Gunning and Charles Musser, all alike with a marked interest in the avant-garde while being more reknown as eminent scholars of early cinema.<sup>7</sup> The bridge that Tom Gunning constructed between early cinema and avant-garde in his classic article on the cinema of attractions is thus far from arbitrary and implicitly points out a genealogy of film studies as well as of the avant-garde when read through the overlapping and intersecting trajectories of people and institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the transatlantic current that gave rise to film studies as an established field, the mobile, dynamic and free-floating energy of the avant-garde helped to implement film festivals and art houses. The event culture of Stuttgart, Baden-Baden and La Sarraz gave rise to the international festival circuit<sup>9</sup>, the archival impulse created archives in major cities across the globe and also the international network connecting them (*FIAF*) while the avant-garde cinemas *Studio des Ursulines*, *Studio 28*, *Theatre du Vieux Colombier*, *De Uitkijk* and *Kamera* gave rise to a parallel system of production, distribution and exhibition that has been institutionalised after World War Two and is commonly known as art cinema.<sup>10</sup> Film education and media studies took up important impulses from the vocational impulse developed in avant-garde circles and film books and magazines are still inspired by classic examples of the 1920 and 1930s, many of which continue to be reprinted in new editions for students of film as the texts of Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin, Delluc, Dulac, Balász, Arnheim, Kracauer, Richter, Grierson, Rotha and others still form part of the film studies curriculum. I hope to have shown that the production of films was only one element in a much wider

strategy to change cinema culture: teaching and publishing, screening and discussing, distributing and theorising, inventing and modifying were all part of the avant-garde conception: »those who change the cinema will change the world«. Since cinema was then understood in its widest possible sense, as discourse, dispositif, practice or cultural formation, this avant-garde is still with us, perhaps more so than it was for a very long time.

Ultimately, the avant-garde aimed at overcoming and abolishing itself because it wanted to do away with traditional art. By refusing to accept the institutions of bourgeois art, by trying to dispose these, the avant-garde at once evoked a mythical past in which art was an integral part of life as well as a future which would overcome the barriers between art and life. Yet, this characteristic double movement which skips the present was not aimed at a restorative reconstruction of a mythical past, but it wanted to bracket the tensions and contradictions of modernity in order to solve them on another level and at another time. Working with modern technology meant to accept the given reality and to include and redeem it within the avant-garde which – as the activists believed – prefigured future society and constituted a test run for the art to come. This was the specific contribution of the avant-garde working in reproductive media: to self-reflexively address through its very means of expression the conditions of modernity that made itself possible in the first place.

If we consider the avant-garde as a self-deconstructing myth, as an attempt to modernise and update the antique, pre-modern hero in a Hegelian sense transcending himself then the avant-garde is indeed heroic in the way that it does what it (thinks it) has to do because their deeds will ultimately make their own existence superfluous. By anticipating a future order, by presenting a utopian promise the avant-garde also robs itself of its own place in that future society because the avant-garde has to exceed all limits of the present society in order to make the future come true. It is this heroic act – sacrificing itself by attempting to destroy the very own basis on which one stands because annihilating the present is necessary for realising the future – that hurls the avant-garde out of the realm of the modern. This concept of heroism and the pre-modern offers another perspective on the results of the study.

There is a widespread agreement in sociology that the most prominent feature of modern societies is »functional differentiation«. Now, exactly with that element of social life that constitutes modern-ness is what the avant-garde attempted to do away with. By conceptualising their activities as a totality, the avant-garde wanted to overcome functional differentiation and specialisation. And it was functional differentiation that came back with a vengeance once it became clear that the high promises of the avant-garde were not achievable in the near future. The developments of the 1930s demonstrate how a broad movement yielded many results, but failed in its ultimate goal of restructuring art and society. Still, many of the figures of thought prevailed: one can interpret Grierson's genealogical

reference to Flaherty as a displacement in order to cover up the indebtedness to the Soviet revolutionary cinema. The perspective proposed here opens another avenue: Flaherty's exclusive concentration on pre-modern social formations camouflages the avant-garde's heroic attempt to overcome the specialisation of the modern times with a similarly heroic totality. The paradoxical Soviet situation in which art had the function to illustrate the future paradise mirrors the situation in which the past is evoked for a future state. The utopian aspiration towards a total cinema, the various teaching activities as well as the attempts at restructuring exhibition and distribution – all these examples that I have discussed work towards a wholeness and totality directed against functional differentiation. Yet, it is exactly in this specialisation that the true achievements of the avant-garde are to be found (archives, film history, film theory, vocational training etc.). The avant-garde is riddled and haunted by unsolvable, indeed dialectical, paradoxes.

Inevitably, I have had to be very broad at times, mapping a terrain where there is still much leeway to drill deeper holes than I have been able to do in this work. The relationship of the avant-garde to the various amateur movements in the 1930s or a closer look at the links between the emerging documentary and the self-differentiating avant-garde seem viable research projects and interesting topics to follow up. Also, the various conceptions of employing the cinema to rally support, propagate (political) opinions and militate for specific causes that different nation states instituted over the course of the 1930s and 1940s closely relates to concerns first articulated within the framework of the avant-garde. It may be time to comparatively explore the use of film and the cinema not only in fascist-totalitarian countries as different as Germany, Italy or Portugal, all using film as a heavily state-controlled propaganda instrument, but also in liberal reform governments such as those of France during the *front populaire*, Britain and Sweden in the 1930s or the United States during the New Deal where democracies attempted to employ film as a means of persuasion and education, while assessing both practices in relation to the engagement of media in Stalinist Soviet Union.

As the wider implications of this study are concerned I hope to have also contributed to putting Europe more firmly on the map of cinema history. While Europe has often been conceptualised as a rather unconnected accumulation of national cinematographies or as a series of national new waves that succeeded one another from the late 1940s (Neo-Realism) until the 1970s (New German Cinema) I have attempted a conceptualisation of Europe not as a series of distinct national territories, but as a unified (even though highly heterogeneous) space in which energy flows, stagnates and re-distributes itself regardless of national frontiers. In a way, the alternative network proposed here was the shadow of the power of the big corporations. While the vertically integrated German major Ufa arguably was the most important European company from 1919 to 1945, it was complemented by the avant-garde – both were stuck in an antagonistic stance towards each other, but

both also needed the other: not only as a means of differentiation and to be able »to make a distinction« in a Luhmannian sense of double contingency, but moreover in a dialectical relationship in which Ufa (and some other big companies such as Tobis or Gaumont-Franco-Film-Aubert) would provide the avant-garde with (direct and indirect) commissions while, in turn, the avant-garde delivered prototypes and innovations that the industry sometimes adapted and sometimes discarded.

In the epitaph to this epilogue I have quoted Walter Benjamin's comparison of Sergej Eisenstein's POTEMKIN to a perfectly constructed bridge that resonates beautifully on being hit. I hope that I have not only used the avant-garde as a resonance board and percussion instrument by listening to the still fresh and original sound eighty years on. I hope that I have been able to use the bridge in another and much more obvious way – crossing a gap or a divide between the historicity of the canonical avant-garde and my present situatedness within institutional and professional parameters. Yet, since the avant-garde did not connect two dots with a straight line this bridge is far from explored and exhausted. It supports more research and it will sound louder and more beautifully the more scholars and students, film archivists and media-activists will dare to walk on it or make it resonate.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin: »Erweiterung an Oscar A.H. Schmitz«. In: W.B.: *Gesammelte Schriften. II.2.* Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1977: 751-755, here 755. [»POTEMKIN is a huge, rarely successful film.[...] This film is ideologically concreted, correctly calculated in every detail like a bridge arch. The more forceful one hits it, the more beautiful it resounds. Only on rattling with gloved fingers one does not hear nor move anything.«, my trans.]

<sup>2</sup> See Roland Cosandey: »On Borderline«. In: *Afterimage*, no. 12, autumn 1985: 66-85. See for photos of the 1979-meeting Freddy Buache (ed.): »Le cinéma indépendant et d'avant-garde à la fin du muet. Le Congrès de La Sarraz (1929) et présentation des films projetés au Symposium de Lausanne (1-4 juin 1979) organisé à l'occasion du Congrès annuel de la Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAP) à Lausanne du 30 mai au 1<sup>er</sup> juin 1979«. In: *Travelling*, no. 55, summer 1979.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Cronin's film *FILM AS A SUBVERSIVE ART: AMOS VOGEL AND CINEMA 16* (GB 2003) screened at the Berlin film festival 2004; see also the recent collection by Scott MacDonald: »Cinema 16: Documents Towards a History of the Film Society«. In: *Wide Angle*, vol. 19, no. 1: 3-48; see also Vogel's own statements in *Film As a Subversive Art*. New York: Random House 1974.

<sup>4</sup> See presentation by Rahul Hamid: »Establishing the New York Film Festival«. At: *Cinephilia: A Symposium*, New York University, February 22-23, 2002. Richard Roud in turn, the co-director of the New York Film Festival, has written the first English language biography of Henri Langlois, one of the »fathers« of the archival movement who had his first contacts with the cinema in the ciné-clubs of the 1920s and 1930s. There are many such circular relations to be found. See Richard Roud: *A Passion for Films. Henri Langlois and the Cinémathèque Française*. London: Secker & Warburg 1983.

<sup>5</sup> See Jay Leyda: *Kino. A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*. London: George Allen & Unwin 1960 and *Films Beget Films. Compilation Films from Propaganda to Drama*. London: George Allen & Unwin 1964.

<sup>6</sup> Annette Michelson, besides editing books on Warhol and Oshima and publishing countless articles, edited a book with the collected writings of Vertov in English. See Annette Michelson (ed.): *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1984.

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<sup>7</sup> See the personal reminiscences by Charles Musser: »Noël Burch, *Film Practice* und das Studium des frühen Kinos – eine persönliche Erinnerung«. In: Frank Kessler, Sabine Lenk, Martin Loiperdinger (eds.): *KINtop 12: Theorien zum frühen Kino*. Frankfurt/Main, Basel: Stroemfeld / Roter Stern 2003: 87-90 and, especially for the notion of »revalorization« and a critical comparison of the positions occupied by Burch, Gunning and Musser, see Charles Musser: »Historiographic Method and the Study of Early Cinema«. In: *Cinema Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1, Fall 2004: 101-107.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Gunning: »The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde«. In: *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 3/4, 1986. Reprinted in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.): *Early Cinema. Space, Frame, Narrative*. London: BFI 1990: 56-62.

<sup>9</sup> See the ongoing research by Marijke de Valck for a theoretical and historical evaluation of the film festival phenomenon [PhD 2005 Universiteit van Amsterdam].

<sup>10</sup> For a study of the American post-war art houses see Barbara Wilinsky: *Sure Seaters. The Emergence of the Art House Cinema*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press 2001.

