Challenging Form

Experimental Film & New Media
Experimental Film

- Non-Narrative
- Non-Realist
- Smaller Projects by Individuals

Distinguish from Narrative and Documentary film: Experimental Film focuses on the formal and aesthetic properties that make up films: images in motion.

Experimental Films: commonly reflect on the material specificity of the film medium and the conditions in which it is experienced by audiences. Changes in technology bring changes in the form and object of these reflections.
A Short History of Experimental Film & Media Practices

- **Modernity**: a term that both names a broad period of history stretching from the end of the Medieval era (with its primarily theological conception of the world) to the present, and identifies an attitude toward progress and science centered on the human capacity to shape history that is characteristic of our age.

- **Emphasis on science and knowable facts** has historically been contested through Romantic and Aesthetic traditions that stress individual expressivity, among other ideas that experiment with notions of meaning that cannot be explained through rational thinking.

- **Modernism**: a movement in early 20th century philosophy, thought, and art that emphasizes the discontinuities and rhythms of modern life, particularly influenced by the jarring impact of WWI (the first industrialized war).

- **Modernist Themes**: Machines, Industry & Technology (dynamic motion), Accelerated and Disjunctive Time, Cities & the Urban, Spatial Juxtaposition and Fragmentation, War, Chaos, Confrontation, Assault. The invention and industrial use of film is one development that was influenced by Modernist thought.
1910s-1920s: European Avant-Garde Movements

- German Expressionism
- France: Cubism, Impressionism influence Cinema
- USSR: In the wake of the Russian Revolution (1917), Soviet filmmakers were inspired by Constructivism (dynamic, machine-aged art that served a social purpose), which leads to experiments with Montage.
- Exploration of the connection between the human form and machines through fragmented, geometrical images of human bodies, and the use of human forms as aesthetic objects rather than traditional subjects.
1930s-1940s Sound & Vision: Maya Deren

- Maya Deren & (husband) Alexander Hammid
- Interests in poetry, dance, choreography, ritual, psychoanalysis
- Use of lightweight 16mm camera & amateur format
- Meshes of the Afternoon (1943)
- Non-Narrative: images accumulate, repeat and contrast in associative chains and patterns.
- Striking Imagery & Structure: use of symbolic associations that invite narrative speculations.
- Dreamlike & often termed a “trance film.”
1950s-1960s: The Postwar Avant-Garde in America

- **Stan Brakhage** (Deren's protege): films arrange imagery in sensual, abstract patterns, relying on personal subject matter. Brakhage often manipulated the film stock physically by painting, scratching and taping artifacts to the celluloid to emphasize the materiality of film and the filmmaker's direct creative process.

- American Experimental Film Community: New York's Cinema 16, Anthology of Film Archives, The Film-Makers' Cooperative, Canyon Cinema.

- **Underground Film** (1960s): Andy Warhol explores temporal properties of cinema with 8-hour view of the Empire State Building with Empire (1966). Films in this era also tackle counter-cultural subject matter, such as gender and sexual politics, in experimental ways.
1968 and After: Politics and Experimental Cinema

- **Postwar Europe, Asia & Latin America**: Innovative new cinemas challenged and energized commercial cinemas with their visions & techniques, drawn from experimental film.

- **Third Cinema**: Spurred by decolonization movements, the Cold War.

- **Blending of Experimental & Documentary forms**: as documentary “truth” is also questioned during this period, and self-reflexive techniques are woven into traditional formulas (New Hollywood, for example).
1980s-Present: New Technologies & New Media

- **Consumer Video Formats:** Spur the growth of activist video & video art.

- **MTV (1981):** adopts previously experimental techniques into mainstream TV (rapid montage, handheld camera, breaking continuity, juxtaposition of film stocks).

- **Interactive & Digital Formats:** Video games, etc. blur the lines between artists and viewers/users.
The Elements of Experimental Media

- Formalism
- Experimental Organization
- Styles & Perspectives
Formalisms: Narrative Experimentation & Abstraction

- **Formalism**: Concerned with the problems of form over issues of content. Exploration of the qualities of light, the poetry of motion, the juxtaposition of sound and image, and inquiries into ways of seeing motivate formalist experimental filmmaking.

- **Non-Narrative**: Lack well-defined characters or plots, some refusing plots (anti-narrative).

- **Abstraction/Abstract Films**: Formal experiments that are also non-representational, using color, shape, and line to create patterns and rhythms that are purely form-based or abstracted from real actions or objects.
Experimental Organizations

• Experimental works organize experiences in ways that defy realism and rational logic, or use alternative formal organizing principles.

1. **Associative Organizations**: Create psychological or formal resonances that give these films a dreamlike quality that engages viewers’ emotions and curiosity.

2. **Metaphoric Associations**: Link or associate different objects, images, events, or individuals in order to generate a new perception, emotion, and/or idea.

3. **Symbolic Associations**: Isolate discrete objects or singular images that can generate or be assigned abstract meanings.

4. **Structural Organizations**: Reject the illusionism of narrative film and challenge the audience’s perceptions with a focus on the material of the film (its grain, sprockets, journey through the projector past a beam of light). This organization follows a particular editing logic or other formal principle of construction, and often engages viewers’ sensations as well as intellectual curiosities.

5. **Participatory Experiences**: Approach emphasizing the centrality of the viewer and the time and place of exhibition as part of cinematic artistry (conceptual video art, interactive video experiments).
Styles and Perspectives

- **Surrealism**: Uses recognizable imagery in strange contexts, which simultaneously defies realist tendencies and narrative, instead emphasizing photographic reproduction and images unfolding in time (France 1920s).

- **Lyrical Styles**: Express emotions, beliefs or personal positions with film, often by emphasizing a personal voice or vision through techniques like unique imagery, voiceovers, or handheld cameras (often autobiographical, Postwar U.S.).

- **Critical Positions**: Structure a film or media work through interrogation of its form, content, or communication with the viewer. These films encourage audiences to take up similar critical positions by exposing them to formal experiments that demand that viewers question how, not just what, they are seeing (rooted in social critiques of 1960s).
The Significance of Experimental Media

- Challenging and Expanding Perception:
  - Ask audiences to reflect on the viewing experience.
  - Explore phenomena, perception, and consciousness.
  - Contemplate the way human senses and consciousness function by challenging and expanding how viewers experience perception.
  - Depend on evolving ways that technologies present new perceptual possibilities.
Experimental Film Traditions

- **Expressive Traditions**: Emphasize personal expression and communication with an audience, and are tied to long-standing notions of artistic originality, authenticity, and interiority.

- **Confrontational Traditions**:
  - Rooted in Modernism of 1920s and often related to the urge to shock the middle class.
  - Motivated by change and interaction with real world events, in contrast to Expressive traditions of personal or individual artistic expressivity, and instead stresses the confrontation of conventions, audiences, expectations, or associations in a wider social, political, or aesthetic critique.