

## Underground Cinema and Avant-Garde Art: The Rise of American Independent Cinema

<sup>1</sup>Nan Li, <sup>2</sup>Heonyong Jung

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. candidate, Dept. of Business Administration, Namseoul Univ., Korea

<sup>2</sup>Prof., Dept. of Business Administration, Namseoul Univ., Korea  
[gotoyong@nsu.ac.kr](mailto:gotoyong@nsu.ac.kr)

### Abstract

*The emergence of independent cinema in the United States in the 1960s was the earliest sign of post-modernism in the country, which was often referred to as "underground cinema". The works, in a counter-cultural stance, overturned the thought of depth of traditional art cinema, not exploring the meaningful relationship between form and content in terms of artistic technique, but creating an aesthetic that echoed the "Pop Art" of the time by collaging established means of expression with traditional and fashionable ones in a consumerist manner. In this paper, American independent cinema was examined, firstly by analyzing the local and external factors that contributed to its rise. Secondly, two genres of independent cinema core paradigm, "underground cinema" and "pop cinema" were focused on, as a way of demonstrating the attention and influence that independent cinema has gained. Finally, we found that independent cinemas are also seeking for alternative exploration and diverse expressions in the context of the times.*

**Keywords:** *Underground Cinema, American Independent Cinema, Avant-Garde Art, Pop Art*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 150 years of modern art, the concept of avant-garde has mostly been used to refer to a specific type of artistic style that rejects the conventions of mainstream cultural and social values. The term "avant-garde" first appeared in France in the first half of the 19th century, seemingly as a result of the increasing social fragmentation caused by industrialization. European artists served the elite, and it was the values of the elite that were expressed and generally shared by artists. When certain groups of artists were able to monopolize the patronage of the elite, those who were excluded developed an ideology of their own to legitimize their innovative aesthetic practices and liberal political views. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was characterized by its alienation from the rest of society and, above all, by its opposition to bourgeois society [1]. Rejecting and opposing the mass culture, avant-garde art developed as it began to attack the formal aesthetics that had been the focus of modernism. As new art movements emerged in succession and social contexts were transformed, avant-garde art challenged the traditional categories of art in terms of form.

Native American modern art emerged in the early 20th century and began to mature in the middle of the century with the emergence of the first modern art school, abstract expressionism. By the 1960s and 1970s, another international modern art movement, centered in New York, had once again flourished in the United

---

Manuscript received: January 22, 2022 / revised: March 1, 2022 / accepted: March 8, 2022

Corresponding Author: [gotoyong@nsu.ac.kr](mailto:gotoyong@nsu.ac.kr)

Tel: +82-41-580-2430, Fax: +82-41-581-4001

Professor, Dept. of Business Administration, Namseoul Univ., Korea

Copyright©2022 by The International Promotion Agency of Culture Technology. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>)

States, with the emergence of pop art as the mainstream of American modern art.

After the post-war reconstruction and restoration in the 1950s, Europe and the United States witnessed unprecedented economic development in the 1960s and entered a "post-historical" phase. As an alternative to late modern art and the post-modern period, it was characterized by the disappearance of beauty, disappearance of the boundaries between art and life, pluralism, and an attempt to establish mechanisms and frameworks for interpretation. In the art era of what Arthur Danto called "post-historical", the basic forms of contemporary art have given rise to new forms such as pop art, performance art, happening art, minimal art, conceptual art, and earth art, which have also broken the established discourses in the fields of production, dissemination, and presentation, forming a new art ecology. The absence of a macro-historical narrative was one of the cultural manifestations of the 1960s; amidst the breakdown of social consensus and the social tearing apart brought about by radical freedom, in the Western art circle in the 1960s, intervention in society and culture was already a publicly stated position and an action already carried out by many artists and participants in the art movement so that the core concerns in the field of the social history of art lay in establishing a link between the refined, self-disciplined field of art and the external social culture [2]. The "avant-garde theory" and its extensions dominated the rise of artistic concepts throughout the late modernism period. Artists were always eager to create or modify an art to adapt to the post-industrial era with new situations and "avant-garde" ideas.

## **2. THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT PRODUCTION**

The "youth culture" that emerged in the late 1950s provided an opportunity for the film market to develop. Many producers saw the rapidly growing teenagers and their target audience changed from the previous family audience to specific groups. The youth film market gains targeted audiences by films themed with rock and roll, crime, science fiction, horror, and sex, which are known as "exploitation movies". In order to attract audiences at low ticket prices, they had to make low-budget productions, where no stars or creative teams are involved. Therefore, these films were created using current events or horrific subjects that can be "exploited". As a result, small independent producers, or exploitation studios, produced low-budget science fiction, horror, erotica, and crime films. Exhibitors made much more money from these films than from the output of the big studios and were therefore willing to show such cheap independent productions.

Many star actors want to get out of the big studios and take some control over their films due to the paycheck and the profitability of their films, while some big studios want to cut costs by reducing their contracts with the stars, which makes the agency the focal point of negotiations. By putting stars and film projects into a deal to sell by "packaging", scripts and production talents are linked through producers or agents, leading some directors and stars to go it alone and had dominated Hollywood production by the mid-1950s [3]. Packaging sales were the dominant mode of independent production in the United States at that time, but they were not vertically integrated and independent producers had no distribution company of their own, so they had to deal with the big distribution companies.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the whole center of Western avant-garde art shifted from Europe to the United States, and many new artistic trends emerged. When the avant-garde cinema movement prevailed in the United States, it was dominated by "underground cinema, including poetic cinema, abstract cinema, collage cinema, experimental cinema, and structural cinema. Regardless of how the genres were named, they were all produced in an anti-Hollywood manner, and all showed an independent style.

The trend of importing cinemas emerged immediately in the post-war period in the United States, with almost all the major cinemas coming from Europe, which was undergoing an evolving art cinema practice in various modernism styles. The post-war European art cinema depicts the objective realism of happenings without a linear progression of cause and effect, which is the most authentic aspect of direct cinema's expressions, that is, recording objective phenomena. The subjective realism of art cinema interrupts the narrative in a fragmented and disordered way, such as the subjective mental images of flashbacks in Hiroshima

mon amour. In terms of technique, as new technologies continue to innovate, youth cinema embraces a direct approach of filmmaking and eschews post-production narrative interpretation, thus finding ways to express personal attitudes centered on the naturally occurring time.

Imported art cinemas have gained interest from the audience due to their bold subject matter and less esoteric themes, and provided low-cost products for small movie theaters. Independent art movie theaters attract the local urban elite by ordering foreign art cinemas, and drive-in movie theaters attract suburban populations outside the city because they do not require expensive buildings and screening facilities. While art movie theaters show imported foreign cinemas, there are also venues for local, innovative, and independent cinemas to be shown and circulated so as to rescue declining attendances.

### 3. UNDERGROUND CINEMA

American avant-garde filmmakers renewed the idea of personal expression. Experimental cinema seeks to explore cinema media and a kind of filmmaking of repressed and forbidden themes, which avoids complete narrative forms and uses lyrical, associative, symbolic, dreamlike, or other methods instead of conventions of mass entertainment cinema. After the war, hundreds of cinema clubs sprang up in European cities and universities. In the United States, most schools, universities, and museums were equipped to show experimental cinemas, and institutions were established to nurture experimental cinemas which became the dominant force in the post-war period. Additionally, many elder avant-garde filmmakers moved to the United States, and many trendsetters emerged, gradually making America the dominant force in avant-garde cinema.

The youth culture of the late 1950s became a counter-culture in the 1960s. Many young people rejected traditional values and embraced the teachings of rock and roll, "hallucinogenic" agents, and Zen Buddhism. For a time, avant-garde artists automatically became part of this social trend, while experimental filmmakers found themselves "underground". Within the cinema community, "underground" initially meant "independent" and "anti-Hollywood", and soon almost all experimental cinemas were referred to as "underground cinemas" because they offered a different look of the world that was ignored by Hollywood. The avant-garde, with its youth popular culture and a counter-cultural tendency to disobedience, gradually became closely associated with fine art, and the so-called "underground cinema" was thus formed. What is meant by fine art creation is in fact a novelty in the art circle, an art that is known as "avant-garde art" and breaks the boundaries between conception and creativity.

The word, "underground cinema", was defined by Stan Vanderbeek at first. It is often said that he has created two key words of experimental cinema: "underground cinema" which describes the animated cinema he has made in the early days and "expanded cinema" which depicts the on-site multimedia activities he has attended in the later days [4]. Vanderbeek [5] was highly acclaimed for stop-motion collage films at the end of the 1950s. In a 10-minute short film, *Science Friction* (1959), the cold war is presented in a form of animation made from the clippings of television images and comics on news media. Most daily stuff and people are projected into the air through the forms of rockets and the landmark buildings, such as the Empire State Building, the U.S. Capitol, Washington Monument, Eiffel Tower and the Kremlin, are launched into the air. A 5-minute cartoon, *A La Mode* (1959), is featured by collages of magazines and clipped sounds, where many levels are established by different faces and daily common stuff, so that audience can treat the things in the scene in an abnormal means and feel that the things in the scene are not like their appearance.

In the 1960s, Vanderbeek became one of the most important persons in the fields of art and technical experiments, creating more concepts than he could realize. Vanderbeek is a pioneering avant-garde figure in the new media frontier at the end of the 1960s, whose works integrated artistic methods (eg. collage and abstraction) with electronic media in the ambitious real-time demonstration. As an artist and filmmaker, he was more like designing the experience than creating artistic stuff or films. The transmedia convergence of "expanded cinema" was realized through the modes of new visual art and performance. *Variations V* (1965) is

co-created by the composer Cage, choreographer Cun-ningham, video artist Nam June Paik through the cooperation of different media. This kind of transdisciplinary "collection" has made up the deficiency of collage and media performance in aesthetics and concepts. His work *Movie- Mural* (1965) is both background and performance elements. This work is usually analyzed part by part, which is considered as the overlay of media as a whole where every medium has its contribution and share in production. Some original images can be juxtaposed and ordered, but the diversity and ever-changing relationships of various images are the most important. For this kind of open influence, multimedia subjectivity or communication consciousness is introduced to present a new relationship between subject and work in a mass media environment [6]. In addition, his works also represent people's hopes on diversity and the spread of images and he aims at touching the emotional foundation of everyone, namely the non-language foundation of human life, which is built on the ideas of immediacy, real-time transmission and messages [7].

#### 4. ANDY WARHOL AND POP CINEMA

In an art exhibition in 1962, the audience noticed a group of artists, who selected materials from mass culture and ironically criticized American life, and undoubtedly, Andy Warhol was the most important one among them. Later, after the audience accepted the mass media, Warhol turned to be involved in cinema, becoming one of the filmmakers of underground cinema. His first batch of films presents the techniques of graphic art creation. *Sleep* (1963), *Eat* (1963) and *Kiss* (1963) show the themes of daily life nearly without plots, where figures, stories and shooting methods are extremely simple and graphic. They are all silent films without editing between scenes and techniques of cameras. Each film can be shortly summarized as: a man is sleeping; a man is eating mushrooms; a couple is kissing. *Sleep* lasts a particularly long time, 3 hours, truly and purely recording a sleeping man. However, the duration time of *Empire* (1964) is longer, 8 hours, showing changes of the Empire State Building in New York in 8 hours.

During the most active 5 years from 1963 to 1968, Warhol personally directed the creation of experimental cinema which has triggered the discussion in "The Silver Factory". "Factory" was called the heart of underground culture in New York at that time, combining the artistic creation and social salon, and members he appreciated would appear in his works. In the mid-1960s, Warhol has shot *Screen Tests* (1964- 1966) for over four hundred rolls of film by a 16 cm monochrome camera, including Allen Ginsberg, Susan Sontag and Yoko Ono, among others. This work is the best record of "Factory" members and also the best representative of creation methods with members as materials by Warhol.

After finishing the "recording" media experiments of silent films, Warhol began to create the films with sound, performance and narration. In *Up Tight* (1966), juxtaposed screening of two clips follows the tide of "expanded cinema", with the background rock music. On the occasion, Warhol also served as an agent of underground music, being passionate about musical activities. Lasting for 3 hours, *The Chelsea Girl* (1966) consists of 12 short films, where two videos are playing on two screens by adopting the split screen and different guests of Chelsea Hotel in New York are shown without narration. However, there is only one audio track in the film, so the audio track alternately sounds from the dialogues of two clips according to one screen. The two clips can contrast each other or unite as one, so that avant-garde film portrait can be a collage of people with different emotions.

If the work *Kiss* is the start of creating pornographic works by the silent graphic artists, *Couch* (1964) and *My Hustler* (1965) exhibit the feature of underground and the desire of homosexual love, and *Blue Movie* (1969) is a pioneering work which can be released to the public in the era of American pornographic cinema, coinciding with the characteristics of anti-moral culture and sexual liberation at that time. Although in the framework of the Vietnam War and other irrelevant topics, the work is aimed at indifferently presenting the state of sexual love, which is the pure expression of nihilism. In *Film History*, David Bordwell commented that the contribution of Andy Warhol to the avant-garde cinema equals "the contribution of Godard to the art

cinema." In the works of Warhol, the passive description of things specifically shows an avant-garde aesthetics of boredom. When John Milton Cage and other avant-garde artists emphasized the profound interest delivered by the repeated and trivial actions and time, Warhol increasingly began to consider boredom as a kind of value. After *The Chelsea Girl* has received some commercial publishing opportunities, the films of Warhol took part in this cultural change to promote the appearance of underground art when the avant-garde art has become a part of "art career" and the art circle has been changed by critics, museums and media into the dying-out popular fields [3].

## 5. THE UNUSUAL EXPLORATION AND DIVERSE EXPRESSION

Like many artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Robert Breer was attracted by the dynamic aesthetic and philosophic characteristics. As a painter, he began to be devoted to film animation as a way of his abstract exploration in modernism. By breaking away from the fixed time limit in traditional narrative structure, live actions, rotoscope, and abstract form are combined and various colors are intentionally painted to construct an unstable internal cinema space, where the audience can feel the characteristics of films and the collision or combination of moving images and modernist painting experience can be created, so that cinema technology can allow a new method to think about the images as occasional sets. We can experience the numerous dual structures, such as the independence and continuity of the frame, space and time, reality and appearance, two dimensions and three dimensions, and continuity and interruption [8].

Similar to the works of Stan Vanderbeek and Robert Breer, the films of American sculptor Bruce Conner constitute a work style which can be called a film combination, where the combination of timeliness and performance and the aesthetics of resulting juxtaposed media can transform the contemporary art at a broader level. For example, *A movie* (1958), drawn from pornographic clips, newsreels, novel short films and film scenes of old Hollywood, includes many irrelevant scenery shots, crowded vehicles interspersed with passers-by, violence and war, which causes a severe sense of imbalance and form the unique style of fragments, thus becoming the masterpiece of film editing. As Brian O'doherty commented on the combined works of Conner in Alan Gallery, he focused on the *A movie* and said, "Some of the collage images are so well known y that they send the mind pin wheeling out of the movie on a tangent while the next sequence is demanding attention y the film clips of reality are used as objects – not as objects prompting Surrealist associations, but as objects from real life loudly claiming attention while being forced into a relationship to contribute to the movie. The movie is split open again and again by real life hurtling through it. This is remarkably like the effect Robert Rauschenberg gets in his latest paintings" [9].

Marie Menken is the most important legendary female director in America after Maya Deren, whose works have influenced many successors. She said, "Filmmaking was a natural evolution while I was engaged in painting, particularly since I was primarily concerned in capturing light, its effect on textured surfaces and its glowing luminescence in the dark, the enhancement of juxtaposed color, persistence of vision and eye fatigue" [10]. For instance, In *Light* (1966), the light of city streets at night is shot by changing the angles and distance of the camera lens, so a scene composed of shiny lines and halos is completed to convey the emotion. As she mentioned her affection for cinema in 1966, "There is no why for my making films. I just liked the twitters of the machine, and since it was an extension of painting for me, I tried it and loved it. In painting I never liked the staid and static, always looked for what would change the source of light and stance, using glitters, glass beads, luminous paint, so the camera was a natural for me to try – but how expensive!" [11].

In an art exhibition in 1962, the audience noticed a group of artists, who selected materials from mass culture and ironically criticized American life, and undoubtedly, Andy Warhol was the most important one among them.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As numerous artists joined the positive experiments of underground cinema, underground cinema was widely popular at the end of the 1960s and there was a market for it in the early 1970s, which was screened in cinemas at midnight and the movie clubs in campus. Meanwhile, opportunities of the commercial market have been provided for the non-underground directors and filmmakers. Produced from the influence of anti-commercialization and anti-traditionalization of new cinema trends, underground cinema expresses personal opinions and emotions by upgrading techniques as experimental cinema develops, and it is made by breaking through the limit of concepts.

The position of avant-garde artistic concepts has been changed from the margin to the center, and the concepts are no longer strongly against. Underground cinema plays a core role in the experimental independent cinema, and a new form of film is gradually developed. From the novel themes to systematic non-narration, the abundant details always can trigger the deep thinking of the audience, representing the feature of "reflexivity", which is called "structural film". The modernist characteristics of cinema let the audience notice the apparent or illusional facts of cinema, and reflexivity of structure not only encourages illusion, but also shows a kind of self-consciousness, forming a sense of participation between audience and films.

This study looked at several cases of Underground cinema and Avant-Garde art, and it is expected that a wider study will be conducted in future studies.

## REFERENCES

- [1] D. Crane, *The transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World 1940-1945*, Translated by Peijie Chang and Wenchao Li, Nanjing: Yilin Press, p.14, 2019.
- [2] D. Carrier, "Theoretical Perspectives on the Arts, Sciences and Technology: The Era of Post-Historical Art," *Leonardo*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 269-272, 1987. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1578172>
- [3] D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, *Film History*, Second Edition, Translated by Fan Bei, Beijing: Peking University Press, P. 434, 2014.
- [4] J. Gosee, "A Machine in the Garden," *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 127-131, March 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcx047>
- [5] S. Vanderbeek, "The Cinema Delimina: Film from the Underground," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 5-15, July 1961. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1211084>
- [6] S. Petersen, "The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerveek's Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema by Gloria Sutton (review)," *Leonardo*, Vol. 49, No. 5, pp. 473-474, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9666.001.0001>
- [7] V. Pantenburg, "Attention, please. Negotiating Concentration and Distraction around 1970," *Aniki: Revista Portuguesa Da Imagem Em Movimento*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 328-343, July 2014. <https://doi.org/10.14591/aniki.v1n2.83>
- [8] H. Kim, "A Study on the Structural Apparat of Animation Frame-Focusing on the Robert Breer's Work," *The Korean Journal of Animation*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 84-104, 2009.
- [9] A.V. Uroskie, "Visual Music after Cage: Robert Breer, Expanded Cinema and Stockhausen's Originals (1964)," *Organised Sound*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 163-169, August 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S135577181200009X>
- [10] IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2318256/>
- [11] W.W. Dixon, "Notes on Marie Menken (review)," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 78-79, November 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1353/flm.2007.0048>