

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The New Innovators of Experimental Film

Amy Cobb · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

Still from Andrew Thomas Huang's Solipsist

It was a Friday night, and I was looking to impress my new boyfriend with Kenneth Anger's *Kustom Kar Kommandos*. My boyfriend made what could be considered experimental poetry films, but he had only heard Anger's name in an undergraduate film course he audited years ago. As I searched for the short, experimental film, I discovered that the actual Anger version was difficult to find. Instead, I clicked through a variety of imitations and remakes. This led me to wonder what other experimental film imitations exist in the world, especially in short cinema, and what they mean in a culture where so many of our mainstream movies are remakes or sequels. It became urgent for me to know where I could discover the new voices of experimental cinema, and if those were the same ones that were creating the covers I found on YouTube.

THE COVERS

Anger's *Kustom Kar Kommandos* is a fragment of a planned feature-length film dealing with cars as a fetish object. Funded by the Ford foundation, the \$10,000 grant only covered three minutes of a young man buffing his "dream lover" hot rod against a pink background. Imitations of this film range from shot-by-shot remakes with poor lighting to *Kustom Skate Kommandos* and *Kustom Kanine Kommandos*, which splices together fragments of Anger's footage and the footage of a small dog. Informal research on the creators of the direct imitation of *Kustom Kar* and *Kustom Skate* (Zane Edwards and Oliver Smith, respectively) revealed that both of these young men continue to work in film, but neither seem invested in contributing to the experimental film conversation exclusively. Smith is still a film student, and his bio on mutinee.com states that his interests mostly lie in sports videography and music-based videos (which, I suppose, could be considered experimental, but not always...) Edwards' website displays a number of nature videos and photographs, but nothing like his imitation of Anger, which was clearly made for a class in school and received a number of hostile comments.

Nevertheless, the hostile comments that Edwards' imitation of *Kustom Kar Kommandos* received pale in comparison to the anger directed at Rueben Rodriguez (perhaps confused with Ruben Rodriguez, a New Jersey filmmaker responsible for MojoCreative Group and films such as *Sawaru*) and his imitation of Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*). In (*nostalgia*), Frampton burns personal photographs slowly on a hot plate while talking about his memories of the photos. (I'd tell you what the "trick" to the film is, but you should look it up on YouTube yourself.) In Rodriguez's version, he withers his photographs on a charcoal grill, adjusting them with tongs along the way.

I don't find the film as gripping as Frampton's black and white original, but I don't hate the filmmaker for trying it. Alas, the only comments Rodriguez received on his (*nostalgia*) were "I hate this" and "This is the worst. I hate you." YouTube audiences (or experimental film fans

looking for their favorites on YouTube) are clearly not fans of remakes, even as we embrace them in the dominant culture. Does this mean anything? Clearly experimental film audiences and those that thought the remake of *Psycho* was the best film ever have very little overlap on that theoretical venn diagram. However, I like to think this contrast may mean that mainstream cinema has positioned itself as the perpetual film or photography student, sticking with the imitation assignment because learning from the past is safer than innovating for the future. An accurate imitation is bound to win the student a good grade—or in the case of mainstream cinema, good box office dollars. Though my sample size was clearly not significant, it reveals that the most watched imitations of my favorite experimental films were not made by those who stayed innovative beyond film school (though I'll be watching out for Oliver Smith). YouTube is not the best source for finding new experimental videos, though it tends to be the Google of online videos. To find the real new innovators of experimental cinema, one is better off looking elsewhere.

WHERE TO LOOK

A search on Vimeo.com for “short experimental” will yield over 7,000 results. It's probably safe to assume that film and videomakers prefer the sharp look of this site, and how it seems to cater to more serious image making – they even host their own “Vimeo Awards,” which proudly features an “Experimental” category. While the shortlist for these awards is a great source for finding many current experimental films, there are many other available sources online. If you liked what you saw in your undergrad film class, check out [Underground Film Journal](#) or [Short of the Week](#), which showcases either a narrative or non-narrative short film weekly, linking users to the film on Vimeo.

SIX RECOMMENDED SHORT FILMS

Like many who are ostensibly interested in experimental cinema, I eventually got sick of watching grainy Stan Brakhage films on my laptop. With an interest in updating my purported interest, I've watched many experimental videos. The following are my favorites:

Dame Factory (Melanie Ambramov)

When less than 14% of directors in Hollywood are women, the 99% female cast and crew of this film are enough to consider alone. The winner in the Experimental category at the 2011 Brooklyn Film Festival, it manages to be both sexy and grotesque.

Phaseone – Sugar (Vadim Gershman and Ryan Powell)

This film, also a Short of the Week pick, establishes its narrative about (ex-)lovers, one of whom is leaving the city for good, through text messages. The animated photos of traffic are juxtaposed with the narrative masterfully, establishing an emotional response in the viewer.

The Ballad Form (Kate Greenstreet)

Poemfilms seem to be taking the poetry world by storm, and Kate Greenstreet is leading the charge. In her films, text and image exist in relationship with one another, and it often feels simultaneously compelling and unnecessary to parse them apart. The text for this video can be found in [dewclaw journal](#).

Solipsist (Andrew Thomas Huang)

This award-winning short film's magic lies in the tension between its gorgeous surface and philosophical themes. A visually-stunning symphony in three movements, *Solipsist* deals with connection and separation. This film truly earned all of the attention it received back in 2012, when

it was awarded the Special Jury Prize for Experimental Short at the Slamdance Film Festival.

Light is Calling (Bill Morrison)

With *Light is Calling*, Bill Morrison makes the viewer question whether the beige-tinted celluloid of James Young's 1926 silent film *The Bells* is actually flesh. This consideration of a romantic encounter manipulates its source to a contemplative pace. Far from a remake, Morrison's film shows us new ways to consider films of the past.

Plasticity 3D (Ryan Suits)

If you think that 3D is merely a gimmick of the mega movie theater, think again. Ryan Suits has been experimenting with stereoscopic images since before film school, and the stereo effect of this film is far from superfluous – I would even say it's necessary. Suits has shown at a variety of festivals, and moderates the stereoscopy channel on Vimeo. He even links viewers to a website that will provide them with free 3D glasses, if you don't happen to have them lying around.

Though an artistic call-to-arms may seem a bit heavy-handed, I think that those of us who took an interest in the avant garde of the past need to be aware of our media consumption and think about how we can elevate the current avant garde as viewers within the audience for largely "democratized" content. In other words, instead of accidentally watching a student cover of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, check out what the Maya Deren's of our day are making now. I promise you that these videos are more titillating and thought-provoking than anything you might encounter as you channel surf.

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