

## **Lines of Sight: a Travelogue** by Paul Arthur (2001)

Avant-garde film has a social history - how could it not have one? Yet aside from occasional scholarly efforts by the likes of David James or Lauren Rabinovitz, what we know of this history as cohesive narrative could fit inside a (film) sprocket hole. To the extent that the avant-garde has claimed a niche in mainstream film historiography, it is connected as a stream of quirky aesthetic objects which (at times) anticipate developments in the dominant film culture. Not surprisingly, the recent wave of film studies research directed at conditions of American exhibition and reception, especially in regard to Early Cinema, completely bypassed noncommercial production. Clearly, this omission cannot be blamed on the anarchic elusiveness of filmmakers or a paucity of primary documents. Despite its bohemian cachet, the avant-garde movement has remained relatively small and self-contained: its network of institutional support is at once notably stable and amply documented. Material such as screening schedules and attendance figures - the required stuff of grant proposals - coexist with a wealth of still photography, organizational correspondence and newsletters such as the homespun Canyon Cinema news, to say nothing of the persistence of a rich oral tradition replete with cherished myths (e.g. the Madison Avenue ad agencies were heavy rental patrons of the avant-garde during the late Sixties).

Forced by necessity and/or political commitment to not only produce but also promote and administer the circulation of new work, a number of our most important filmmakers have been immersed in public struggles. To take the obvious example, various strands in (filmmaker and Anthology Film Archives founder) Jonas Mekas's inimitable career, from Movie Journal newspaper columns to unpublished diaries to the diary films, together constitute a hub around which one version of the movement's social history might be constructed. Indeed, it is perhaps a feature of all marginalized cultural initiatives that they inscribe evidence of social relations with their primary communities as a subtext of aesthetic aspiration. However, attempting to extrapolate from film images to the dynamics of consumption would be, as it were, putting the cart before the horse.

What follows is intended merely as a prod to future scholars and, for the rest of us, a hopefully entertaining interlude. In 1988, while a member of the Board of Film-Makers Cooperative (in NYC), I obtained a foundation grant to study historical patterns in avant-garde film distribution. Ill-equipped to do the sort of statistical analyses the project sorely needed, I did manage to xerox a substantial portion of the Coop's account ledgers, meticulously kept by Leslie Trumbull (the Coop's long time coordinator), thus preserving them against possible water or fire damage. I was, and still am, fascinated by where avant-garde films are seen, when and by whom and in what types of situations - a suggestive area of inquiry about which there is almost no published data. My intuition has always been that

they have had a more diverse reception than is usually assumed and that for certain periods of time the circulation of well-publicized titles rivaled 16 millimeter rentals of popular Hollywood movies. The "millennium" issue of Millennium Film Journal provided a suitable occasion for digging through piles of photocopies and re-imagining the secret life enveloping far-flung projections (exhibitions).

Unfortunately, there are few if any general conclusions to be drawn from these five partial and rather arbitrary lists. What on the surface might appear to be a temporal, geographic, or institutional pattern in the circulation of a given film, or all five films, is rendered moot since the same titles were simultaneously distributed by Canyon (and often handled as well by the filmmaker or by ancillary distributors), entries of films sent to individuals rather than institutions were excluded, and I list only the first rental by a given institution during the prescribed time frame (in several cases, a university rented the same title five or more times in eleven years). Moreover, a given booking provides no indication of a screening's setting or purpose or of other films appearing with it on the same program. The films were chosen in part because they are personal favorites although I also tried to select works representing slightly different periods, lengths, ideas, and visual approaches. Despite many caveats, the spectrum of arenas in which avant-garde films have been shown still seems impressive, and I was struck by the number of private and public high schools that show (or used to show) non-mainstream films. Why certain films were rented by specific organizations - libraries, church groups, medical associations - is for me a genuine enigma, but a very pleasant one at that. Having taken this brief and not terribly arduous peek at the itineraries of a few well-traveled titles, I am eagerly awaiting a more detailed, nuanced, and rationalized picture of this vast uncharted territory. (Editor's note:: the five years of bookings most immediately following the release of the films are listed herein, see Millennium Film Journal 35/36 - Fall 2000 for full 10 year listings in original publication) Little Stabs at Happiness - Ken Jacobs (1959-63 - 15 minutes). Starring the legendary filmmaker/performance artist Jack Smith, Little Stabs smacks together six improvised scenes in a anti-story intended to feel more artless, and heartless, than it really is. Written "headings" and hokey music play havoc with the mood of individual sections as Smith clowns around with dolls, lolls aimlessly, and never ceases chomping at the scenery.

#### Bookings 1963 - 1968:

1963 - Bleeker St. Cinema, Cornell U., U. of Colorado Experimental Cinema Group, Gramercy Arts Theater, TV Guide press preview, Roy Film Archives (Brussels), Canyon Cinema. 1964 - San Juan Arts Center, Washington Film Society, SUNY New Paltz, Canadian Federation of Film Societies, Museum of Modern Art(MOMA). 1965 - New York Times preview, Washington Gallery of Modern Art, U. of Toledo (Ohio), The Bridge Cinema Group, Paradox Lost (NJ), U. of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Arts Center. 1966 - Janus Film Society, Haverford College, Firehouse

Films, Pratt Institute (NYC), SUNY Buffalo, Gold Coast Film Society (Davis, CA), 7th Ward DLF Club (Minneapolis), Cinematheque 16 (LA), St. Eric Foundation, The Happenings Art Club, Philadelphia Art Council, Walker Arts Center, Elmira College.

1967 - Art Institute of Chicago, Lynn Co. TV preview (NY), Rosary Hill College (NY), Mount Holyoke College (MA), Movies Round Midnight, Cinema Psychedelica (CA), The Danforth Foundation (St. Louis), Antioch College. 1968 - The Alumni Club of Chicago, A.C.L.U.-Manhattan, Smithsonian Museum preview, Lotus Film (Atlanta), Life Magazine preview, Wayne Avenue Playhouse (Philadelphia).

Castro Street - Bruce Baillie ( 1966 - 10 min., color/B&W) . A film in the form of a street; Baillie says it was inspired by composer Eric Satie. It is at once a dazzling meditation on the beauty of industrialized landscapes and a mechanized evocation of the movement of consciousness itself. One of the great "train films" yet it covers only a short distance on the outskirts of San Francisco.

Selected Bookings 1968 - 73:

1968 - Wichita State U., NYC Community College, Cambridge Ctr. for Adult Education (MA), Yale U., Freedom Forum, White Plains High School (NY), Newark St. College (now Kean U. NJ), Mount Holyoke College, Southwest Texas State College, Friends of the Whitney Museum, Southwestern College (KS), Cornell, Aardvark, Allegheny College Union (PA), SUNY Cortland, New Jersey Institute for Fine Art, Crack of Doom (Baltimore), Fieldstone School (NY), Apple Farm Art and Museum Center (NJ), Quinnipiac College (CT), U. of Washington, Montgomery County Schools (PA), Moderna Museet (Stockholm), New College (FL), Wayne Ave. Playhouse (Phil.), Smithsonian Museum preview, Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, Central Missouri State College, Brown,

1969 - U. of Iowa, Anthology Theater, NY Cinematheque, Vanderbilt U, NYU, McPheerson College (KN), United Ministry in High Education (Milwaukee), Jewish Museum (NYC), U. of North Dakota, St. Joseph's College, College of N.Rochelle (NY), College of the Virgin Islands, Loyola U., Mt. Hermon School (MA), Colby College (ME), Indep. Film & Multi-media Coop (WI), Rhode Island School of Design, Manhattanville College, Tennessee Fine Arts Ctr., USIA, Aspen School of Contemp. Art, Ohio St. U., Manheim High School (PA), Collegiate School (NYC), U. of Illinois, Center for the Eye (Aspen), New York Film Festival, U. of Penn., Fairleigh Dickenson (NJ), Bard College (NY), MIT, U. of Illinois Medical Ctr., U. of Maryland, Mount Sinai School of Medicine (NYC), Wadsworth Atheneum (CT).

1970 - Well College (NY), Ulster Co. Community College (NY), U. of Wisconsin, U. of S. Carolina, Philadelphia College of Art (now U. Arts), Kent St.U., Newtwn College of the Sacred Heart (MA), Whitney Museum preview, Antioch College, Waukegan Township High School (IL), U. of Florida, Maryland Institute, Harpur College, U. of Delaware, Hudson River Museum, Colorado College, Temple Buell College (CO), Dartmouth College, Long Island City High School, Center Michigan U., Harvard U., Ivy School of Professional Art (PA), U. of S. Florida, Boston U.

1971 - Providence Art Directors' Club, Dana Hall Schools (MA), Loomis School (CT), Slippery Rock St. College (PA), U. of California-Santa Barbara, U. of Minnesota, Kalamazoo College (MI), Trinity College (CT), Wesleyan (CT), Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), Lawrence Academy (MA), Hampshire College (MA), Birmingham Art Association (AL), Edinboro St. College (PA), U. of VA. (Charlottesville).

1972 - Eastern Washington St. College, St. Cloud State College (MN), MOMA, Thomas More College (KS), First Methodist Church (Phil.), Brotherhood-In-Action (NYC), Jersey City State College(now New Jersey City University), Hiram College (OH).

1973 - N. Illinois U., Rockford Art Assoc. (IL), Miami-Dade Jr. College (FL), Illinois St. U., Trinton Regional School (MA), Temple U., Brandeis U., Vassar College, U. of New Mexico, Mt. Hood Comm. College (OR), Queens College City University of New York (CUNY), Upsala College (NJ), Habonim Camp Tel Ari (NY), Spence School (NYC), Walker Art Center(MN).

Fuses - Carolee Schneemann (1964-68 ,23 min., color silent ) Perhaps the most erotic, sexually ecstatic movie produced by the American avant-garde. Like a valentine to a long-standing lover, Fuses combines images of lovemaking bodies with hand-painted color, scratches, rapid montage and other metaphoric expressions of the sensations of love making. Eye-music to the rhythm of passion.

Bookings 1971 - 76:

1971 - Northwestern U., U. of New Hampshire, U. of Calif. (San Diego), U. of Texas (Austin), Ohio U., Dickenson College (PA), Middlebury College, U. of Colorado (Boulder), Festival of Women's Films (NYC), Virginia Commonwealth U. (Richmond).

1972 - Magic Lantern Society (Chicago), Brock U. (St. Catherines, Ont.), Washington U. (St. Louis), Castleton St. College (VT), U. of Minnesota (Minneapolis), Pacific Film Archives, U. of Bridgeport (CT), Southern Methodist U. (Dallas), Santa Barbara City College (CA), American U. (DC).

1973 - CalArts, Miami-Dade Jr. College (FL), Willaims College, Pratt Inst., U. of Maryland (Balt.), Syracuse, Albright College (PA), SUNY Binghamton, Penn. St. U., U. of Calif. (Berkeley), SUNY Buffalo.

1974 - U. of Mass (Amherst), Portland Community College, USIA, Bard College (NY), Queens College, CUNY, Boston College, Phila. Museum of Art, MIT Ctr. for Adv. Visual Studies, Kalamazoo College (MI), Buck County Community College (PA).

1975 - SUNY Purchase, Cedar Crest College (PA), U. of Wisconsin, Art Institute of Chicago, Cornell, Southern Illinois U.

1976 - Denver Free U., U. of RI, Goucher College (MD).

Window Water Baby Moving - Stan Brakhage (1959 12 min. color silent) One of the most famous-in some circles notorious-experimental works. A study of the joys and physical stresses of late pregnancy and childbirth timed to the

movements of celestial bodies, seasons, and the course of light and shadow through a window as the mother to be bathes. About apertures and the rhyming of shapes, a fugue to editing as creative bodying forth of primal emotions.

Bookings 1976 - 81:

1976 - Gustavus Adolphus College, Ithaca College (NY), SUNY Utica, New School (NYC), U. of Mass. (Amherst), U. of Wyoming, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Lydon St. College (PA), Pitzer College (CA), Brooklyn College, U. of N. Carolina (Chapel Hill), Purdue U., Daniel Boone Reg. Libr. (MO), Northwestern, Harvard, Colgate, Wright St, White Ox Films, St. Lawrence U., Walker Art Center, SUNY Buffalo, Dartmouth College, Temple, U. of Hartford, Northern Ill. U., U. of Delaware, Ctr. for Living Force (NY), U. of Rhode Island, U. of Texas (El Paso).

1977 - Westover School (CT), MOMA, Salesian High School (CA), RISD, SUNY Agricultural and Technical College (Cobleskill), Lincoln Land Community College (IL), Thousand Eyes Cinema (NYC), Hiram College (OH), Art Institute of Chicago, Kansas City Art Institute, U. of Maine (Portland), Central Michigan U., Hanover School (MA), Scarsdale Bd. of Educ. (NY), Collective for the Living Cinema, Skidmore College, St. Olaf College (MN), Grand Valley St. College (MI), Princeton Public Library, Hunter College, SUNY Empire St. College (Suffern), Cooper Union, Hobart and William Smith Colleges (NY), Genesee Comm. College (NY), Cleveland St. U., New Trier High School (IL).

1978 - Bethany College (KS), U. of South Florida (Tampa), Cornell, Ball St. U. (IN), American U. (DC), U. of Toledo, Stockton St. College (NJ), Visual Studies Workshop, MIT, U. of Calif. (San Diego), Edinboro St. College (PA), Film Society-West Allas (WI), St. John Fisher College (NY).

1979 - U. of New Mexico, U. of Kentucky (Lexington), Columbia U., Middlebury College, Vassar College, Ramapo College (NJ), Film in the Cities preview, New Mexico St. U. (Las Cruces), Dennison U. (OH), South Dakota St. U. (Brookings), La Guardia College CUNY, Long Island U. , Ohio St. U. (Columbus), St. John's U. (NY), Cayuga Comm. College (NY).

1980 - Otis Art Institute (LA), U. of Kansas (Lawrence), North Carolina Museum of Art (Raleigh), U. of Wisconsin, School of Visual Arts (NYC), Southern Ill. U., Wesleyan U. (CT), U. of Southern Maine, Hampshire College (MA), Macalester College, U of Calif. (Santa Barbara).

1981 - Bard College (NY), U. of Oregon, Old Dominion U. (VA), Contemporary Arts Center (New Orleans).

Zorns Lemma - Hollis Frampton (1970, 60 min., color sound) A signal example of the Structural Film genre of the late 1960s and 1970s, Zorns Lemma takes its organizing principle from a proposition in mathematical set theory. An irresistible intellectual puzzle that will energize even the most jaded of movie fans, it is also a sublime New York City symphony in which language competes with, and is in the end subdued by, purely imagistic qualities of texture, composition, and movement.

Bookings 1970 - 75:

1970 - New York Film Festival, U. of Iowa, Union College (NY), Contemporary Arts Center of Ohio, Canyon Cinema (San Francisco), Yale, NYU, New England College (NH)

1971 - Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), SUNY Buffalo, Hansen Fuller Gallery (San Fran.), Guggenheim Foundation, Ohio U., Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), Cooper Union, U of Hartford, USIA (DC).

1972 - Pratt Institute, S. Dakota U. (Brookings), Pacific Film Archives, Rhode Island School of Design, Hunter College CUNY, Bard College, Harvard-Epworth Church, MOMA, Philadelphia Institute of Cinema.

1973 - U. of PA., Colby College, Northwestern U., U. of NH, Moorehead St. College (MN), Spence School (NYC), Antioch College, Kent St. U., u of Pittsburgh, U. of Oklahoma (Norman), Boston College, Queens College CUNY, U of TX (Arlington)

1974 - U of CA (San Diego), San Francisco Art Institute, Art of Institute of Chicago, Portland Community College, SUNY Purchase, Dartmouth College, Colorado College (Colorado Springs), Wright St. U., MIT,

1975 - Anthology Film Archives, St. John Fisher College (Rochester), Colgate, Purdue U., School of Visual Arts, Brooklyn College CUNY, Oberlin College (OH), U. of New Mexico, Nassau Co. Library, U. of Illinois, Princeton U.

Paul Arthur is a professor of English and Film at Montclair St. University in New Jersey. He has contributed to more than a dozen book anthologies and writes regularly for Film Comment and Cineaste magazines. He co-edits Millennium Film Journal , is a former President of the Board of Director's of Filmmakers' Cooperative in New York City., the oldest and largest artist-run film distribution center for avant-garde film and video. As a filmmaker, Arthur's experimental works have been screened at the Museum of Modern Art, The Kitchen, and the Film Forum (LA.), among other venues.