



David E. James. *The Most Typical Avant-garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xiv + 548 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24258-6; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24257-9.



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Remapping the History of American Independent Film

The works of film scholar David E. James have consistently spotlighted issues surrounding American avant-garde, independent, and underground film. His *Allegories of Cinema* and *To Free The Cinema* have become required reading for anyone with even a passing interest in the varied voices that together make up America's rich alternative filmmaking history.[1]

James's most recent work, *The Most Typical Avant-garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*, represents an exciting new direction for the author, reconfiguring, as the book's back cover proclaims, "Los Angeles, rather than New York, as the true center of avant-garde cinema in the United States." While this provocative claim may raise the hackles of some, James's intriguingly written and carefully argued work clearly shows that alternative production on the West Coast has been ignored or undervalued by independent film scholars for far too long.

Exhaustively inclusive in scope, James's study runs the gamut from early productions of the 1920s to present-day experimentations, with discussions of every significant trend in minor filmmaking in between. It is because

of this comprehensive, indeed, encyclopedic approach, that this work will undoubtedly, like James's other texts on the subject, become a cornerstone for courses on not only independent and underground film, but also American cinema history in general. James's accessible prose and engaging style allow novices and experts alike the opportunity to examine how a vital collection of alternative cinemas developed in an area within spitting distance of Hollywood, the capital of American commercial (mainstream) film production.

James opens by raising a number of pertinent questions: "Have the values, myths, and dreams of Hollywood totally colonized the city? If even amateur filmmaking is so thoroughly shaped by its relation to the major studios, could any culture be truly independent of them? Could filmmakers in the city, if only in isolated moments, effect a cultural decolonization and create cinemas outside of the industry?" (p. 3)

These questions and others—all focused on the possibility of individuals outside of the mainstream carving out cinematic voices for themselves and their cultures—inform the author's drive to discover and document the

various “minor cinemas” (James’s term) that have arisen in Los Angeles over the past eighty years. As the author points out, “Many would have challenged Jonas Mekas’s omission of San Francisco, Chicago, and several other places in his 1964 remark that ‘American cinema remains in Hollywood and the New York Underground’; but few would have contested his omission of an underground in Los Angeles” (p. 11).

What James then proceeds to do is something far more significant—historically, artistically, and politically—than merely uncover the existence of a heretofore unrecognized facet of the American avant-garde. His project, instead, becomes to identify various instances of “minor” cinema production—sites of production outside of the mainstream—and then to place these side by side, highlighting the similarities between them, and establishing, in the process, a diverse population of filmmakers held together by the common artistic drive to respond to the inadequacies and shortcomings of the Hollywood industry. Political films addressing class consciousness, underground films detailing sexual awakenings, personal films investigating ethnic identities, experimental films redefining representability, hardcore adult films interrogating sexual behavior, documentaries revealing social struggles, and independent features remapping “popular” cinema all form significant parts of James’s study. Moreover, James also includes discussions of critical responses to these works, providing not only the historical but also the intellectual contexts around these important and often overlooked works. This allows him both to group together seemingly disparate works, while at the same time, to distinguish what he sees as specific sub-groupings from one another.

This is particularly well illustrated in chapter 6, “The Idea of the Amateur,” in which he discusses the development of the West Coast avant-garde. James takes as his starting point artist Maya Deren’s 1959 essay, “Amateur versus Professional,” and analyzes the usefulness of this distinction for the avant-garde film movement. James explains that the “amateur” must always be seen as a reaction to (rather than predating) the mainstream, given that a culture must preexist the radical practices that are defined against (or in distinction to) it. Until the coming of sound, the author reveals, amateur filmmakers had access to virtually the same kinds of equipment used by their commercial counterparts. The development of the sound motion picture, the attendant commercialization of the art form, and the marketing of “amateur” (i.e., 16mm and 8mm) film production equipment led to a wider gap between “commercial” and “amateur”

filmmaking, and opened up greater possibilities for non-commercial filmmakers to define themselves as different from the mainstream.

The development of alternative film societies first took place at the end of the 1920s in conjunction with the growth of amateur theatrics, as James nicely illustrates (p. 144). Although most of these productions were of the “filmed reality” type (i.e., documentaries or travelogues), some narrative productions were made. James cites Robert Flory’s 16mm film *Mr. Motorboat’s Last Stand* (1933) as an outstanding example of this trend.

Most notable, however, is James’s analysis of the development of two distinct branches of 1960s avant-garde through the figures of Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol—two of the icons of American underground cinema more closely identified with locations other than California, Colorado and New York, respectively, who spent part of their early careers in Los Angeles. The work they created while there is illustrative, James argues, not only of the type of films they later produced, but also of two significant trends in American underground film (identified, respectively, as “lyrical” and “structural” films by film scholar P. Adams Sitney in his groundbreaking *Visionary Film*).^[2] While this type of comparative study, identifying competing trends within the avant-garde, is hardly something new—see Sitney’s *Visionary Film*—James’s approach is significantly different. It represents the first extended analysis of the cultural and aesthetic influence that geographical location (site of production) can have on both the final film product, and on the filmmaker’s overall approach to film. It is unquestionably the case that Warhol would not have had the opportunity (or perhaps even the insight) to ape Hollywood conventions as successfully as he eventually did, had he not met the individuals he encountered in Hollywood. Likewise, Brakhage’s decidedly anti-realist work, too, was influenced by his (mostly bad) experiences with the commercial film industry. “As amateur filmmakers, then,” writes James, “both Brakhage and Warhol dramatized their personal narratives by assembling images of Los Angeles, and though quite different from each other, both were nevertheless mediated by Hollywood and by other cultural practices” (p. 157). James sees Brakhage’s early works as the product of the intersection of early Los Angeles trance films (of which Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid’s 1943 film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* is representative) and Hollywood *films noirs*, while Warhol’s works are a combination of “touristic excitement” (p. 157) and cynical critique.

James continues his discussion of the burgeoning West Coast avant-garde in chapter 7, with extended analyses of the work of Maya Deren and her “acolytes,” as he refers to them, Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, and Gregory Markopoloulos. Part biography, part history, and part criticism, this chapter provides one of the most thorough and engaging studies of the works of these giants of the American underground available today. James provides extensive historical backgrounds, detailing how these artists’ key works were developed, and then includes detailed descriptions of their plots and imagery for those who haven’t had the opportunity to screen them.

This eye-opening addition to existing histories of the avant-garde is only a very small part of James’s awe-inspiring overall project. The same approach that characterizes this segment of the study informs the rest of James’s book as well, whether investigating the early works of leftist film collectives or the more self-reflexive projects of UCLA’s Ethno-Communications Program; the visual abstractions of cinematic artists or the unabashedly graphic works of hard-core pornographers.

The Most Typical Avant-garde is unquestionably one of the most important works of film history and criticism to be published in the last decade. Most noteworthy of all, however, is the fact that James manages to engage with virtually all of the important political and theoretical debates associated with alternative film production, while consciously avoiding lapses into the jargon that have, unfortunately, characterized much recent work on film in general. The book’s singular combination of rich prose, narrative organization, provocative approach, and valuable insights make it both an exciting exploration of an overlooked aspect of U.S. film culture, and a pleasure to read over and over again.

Notes

[1]. David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1989); James, *To Free the Cinema* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[2]. P. Adams Sitney *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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