



Randall Halle, Reinhild Steingröver, eds. *After the Avant-Garde: Contemporary German and Austrian Experimental Film*. Screen Cultures: German Film and the Visual. Rochester: Camden House, 2008. 371 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-365-6.



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Fidgeting Films: Beyond Mainstream Cinema of the German-Speaking World

“Film must fidget,” DEFA filmmaker Ulrich Weiss once observed, and his statement rings certainly true for many experimental films.[1] With their edited volume *After the Avant-Garde: Contemporary German and Austrian Experimental Film*, Randall Halle and Reinhild Steingröver embarked on the difficult task of capturing the creative work of numerous contemporary visual artists. The collection of fifteen essays combines an international array of well-known and emerging scholars with critics and filmmakers in its attempt to complement, or correct, the misperception of many film histories about the demise of (West) German film in the 1980s. The editors claim that the early 1980s as breaking point for narrative film had the opposite effect on experimental film and caused an upswing in East and West Germany, Austria, and Switzerland alike—a “golden age of experimentation” (p. 2). This boom period was located in art schools as well as in experimental settings such as video, computer technology, and 8mm film. Therefore, the collection is not limited to “traditional” cinematic space; instead, the essays reflect on the process of experimental filmmaking

as well as the live performance of “films,” their exhibits in museums and other public spaces, and their often radical political message that excluded them from performance at commercially driven venues.

The volume is divided into two major parts, “Contexts” and “Case Studies.” The essays in the first section approach experimental film as macrocosm, consisting of specific regional examples and paradigms for the use of new technologies in “film”making. Thomas Elsaesser’s essay on the concepts of “art” and “work” in Harun Farocki’s oeuvre and Randall Halle’s investigation of present-day digital images through the work of the Austrian group Social Impact frame the first section of the book. Bernadette Wegenstein contributes to the small corpus of English-language scholarship about contemporary Austrian avant-garde artists and the challenges these artists pose by turning the spectator into a voyeur of the human body in extreme situations, while Randall Halle’s and Reinhild Steingröver’s interview with well-known artist Birgit Hein offers insight into the creative process of experimental filmmaking. An-

nette Jael Lehmann transcends the boundaries of the big screen to show how video recordings transform film and artist alike to offer a weapon against the monocultural domination of the cinematic sphere by television, while Claus Häfner shares his first-hand knowledge of independent film in East Germany before and after the *Wende*. His essay reads well in conjunction with Reinhild Steingraber's look at experimental film within the GDR's DEFA studios, where artists were able to produce non-mainstream film despite the rigid censorship imposed by the government. The final essay in the first section by Nanna Heidenreich and Vojin Saša Vukadinović reflects upon various avant-garde practices and political performances by the artists' collective and anti-racist group Kanak Attak.

The second section—appropriately entitled “Case Studies”—concerns itself with seven examples of significant artists and their works, and positions them in their respective contexts. By no means exhaustive, let alone representative for a diverse field such as experimental film, the essays identify tools to help an audience approach experimental films. For example, Alice Kuzniar illustrates how Bjørn Melhus's postmodern work simultaneously mimics Andy Warhol's pop-cultural pieces while criticizing them through dilettantish reenactment. The “enfant terrible of the contemporary avant-garde” (p. 21), Christoph Schlingensiefel, is the object of Richard Langston's essay. More specifically, he reads Schlingensiefel's reality-TV mock-up *Foreigners Out!* (2000) and other “post-cinematic spectacles” (p. 204) as techniques to advance “counter-public spheres” (p. 220). Robin Curtis leads the reader into Michael Bryntrup's audiovisual autobiographical world of subjectivity, and Rembert Häfner argues convincingly through his reading of *Phoenix Tapes* (2000) that avant-garde film has always had a strong connection to popular film insofar as it recycles established paradigms. Hannover filmmaker Kirsten Winter's short films are the topic of Larson Powell's essay; he demonstrates how the masses of visual information in her films force the viewer to review the films only to result in a “second modernity” that is a different viewing experience upon each viewing.[2] The second part of the book closes with essays by Owen Lyons, who examines the films of Heinz Emigholz under the aspect of their questioning of the history of architectural production as distorted by a number of prominent architects, followed by Christina Schmid's critical analysis of Elke Krystufek's controversial works. The initial shock effect of seeing Krystufek publicly masturbating has meanwhile become a culturally acknowledged practice of the

avant-garde.

The essay selection proves that the editors approached the topic of experimental film diligently. Their introductory caveat of this collection not being able to reflect the variety of experimental film is certainly true, as such an undertaking would fill a multivolume encyclopedia. Yet, the book does a marvelous job of going beyond introductory work about German and Austrian experimental film. While the essays can be read independently, they complement each other in ways that show how the contributors have exchanged their ideas in workshops, seminars, and conferences. Readers looking for information on a single artist or “school” will not be disappointed, but the strength of this collection lies in its mosaic character. Taken together, its wide range of topics will advertise the field of experimental film to novices and film enthusiasts alike and facilitate scholarly work on the films.

Two aspects of the collection are especially refreshing. First, its definition of “contemporary” film spans roughly four decades, from the 1970s to the present, allowing the editors to include essays showing continuities and fractures between the avant-garde films of Weimar and contemporary experimental film more appropriately than by limiting itself to the golden era of modern-day experimental film that began in the 1980s. At the same time, this approach somewhat challenges the notion of a stagnating neo-avant-garde in the 1970s with roots in the postwar era.[3] Second, the work's restraint in refraining from writing a national history of experimental film reflects the international character of many experimental filmmakers. While this point may seem obvious, if one looks at the global exposure and universal appeal of recent artists such as Bjørn Melhus and Kirsten Winter, experimental film in the GDR struggled with obstacles such as a shortage of raw material, lack of official interest and support, and the need to work semi-legally or underground, without the opportunity to present the results to a larger, let alone an international, audience. The two essays about East Germany's tradition of experimental film alone make the book a valuable addition to the bookshelf of anyone interested in film.

My only criticism, which developed before even reading the book, was the apparent omission of Swiss experimental film. The work of Roman Signer in particular would have been an interesting object of inquiry for this collection. This miniscule shortcoming was somewhat offset upon my reading of the introductory essay; there, the editors justify their limitation to Austria and Germany with the fact that “this region offers fertile ground

for the development of an experimental visual culture, not the least of which is because it contains a density of institutions, schools, festivals, museums, galleries, and funding sources that draws productive energies together” (p. 2). Overall, then, this essay collection does a wonderful job bringing attention to the “fidgeting” art that is more often than not worth a more assiduous examination.

Notes

[1]. Radonitzer, “Drei Versuche vom Antihelden,” in

Apropos: Film 2003: Das 4. Jahrbuch der DEFA Stiftung, ed. Ralf Schenk and Erika Richter (Berlin:Bertz Verlag, 2003), 172.

[2]. See Harry Lehmann, *Die flüchtige Wahrheit der Kunst: Ästhetik nach Luhmann* (Munich: Fink, 2006).

[3]. See also Christine Noll Brinkmann, “Experimentalfilm, 1920-2003,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), 461-496.

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