Dissertation Proposal

AGENCY AND AESTHETIC PRODUCTION IN THE AVANT-GARDE FILM COMMUNITY

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Statement of Purpose:

Avant-garde cinema is the production of films by predominantly Western European and North American filmmakers with the intention of critiquing, subverting and providing an alternative to dominant, mainstream media production. The term avant-garde was first used in relation to artistic production by Henri de Saint-Simon, a nineteenth century French utopian socialist who imagined that the arts would be at the vanguard of social change because of their access to the people as a communicative force. Thus avant-garde movements in art, theater, music, and film, born out of modernist social and political ferment in the late 19th century, were imagined both as the future of art practice in the enlightened 20th century and as a corrective to failures of bourgeois romanticism. However, as the 20th century progressed, these modernist movements were institutionalized, becoming part of the educational practices in universities and the curatorial practices of museums. In terms of the film avant-garde, formal experimentations, previously their hallmark, were co-opted by the mass media industry, stripped of their political content, and used to sell everything from alternative rock to pantyhose. Like many other avant-garde art and social movements in the 1980’s the film avant-garde underwent internal dissension and post-modernist critique of its continued relevancy. Yet, a transnational community of filmmakers, with centers of production throughout Europe and North America, still exists whose members call themselves “avant-garde filmmakers”, and their products “avant-garde film”, claiming a common historical trajectory and similar ideological or aesthetic orientation.

The proposed project will examine the nature of avant-garde film and the processes by which avant-garde filmmakers, a community of art world elites, particularly in New York City reproduce their practice and seek to maintain a boundary between it and mainstream practices in the film industry. Given the lack of economic benefits and the marginalization of avant-garde
film products by the dominant film industry, why do avant-garde filmmakers persist in their practice and what distinguishes their work from that of the dominant film industry? In order to answer this primary research question, it is essential to investigate what “avant-garde” means to self-described avant-garde filmmakers; the ideological and aesthetic orientations that bind members of the avant-garde film community together; the symbolic profits that avant-garde filmmakers derive from apparently nonviable economic projects; and how their film products fit into the larger political economy of moving image and art production.

Unlike other avant-garde movements, such as painting and music that are deeply embedded in capitalist market practices, the products of the film avant-garde remain resistant to mainstream market values, with avant-garde filmmakers participating in, and even valorizing, their own economic self-marginalization. This lack of economic viability seems to have promoted an internal system of production and exchange within the avant-garde film community. This exchange system operates both locally and globally, outside of mainstream capitalist market forces, in promoting the circulation of avant-garde films and filmmakers across state and national borders, thereby providing affirmation of an individual’s avant-garde status and reinvigorating more localized resistive discourses within particular avant-garde communities. While such an exchange system may function as a boundary-maintaining mechanism, it should be recognized that avant-garde film practices have not been totally rejected by the dominant institutions. For example, some avant-garde formal experimentation practices have been co-opted by mainstream media practitioners, while some universities hire avant-garde filmmakers and some museums show their work in special screenings. Moreover, although the state does act as an arbiter of taste through acts of censorship in the name of “public decency” some avant-garde filmmakers receive legitimation of their work through institutional and state funding. I would like to investigate how these apparently antithetical processes of rejection and legitimation work among members of the avant-garde film community in New York City in particular and across national boundaries in general.

In this regard, the avant-garde film community will be examined as a transnational “imagined” community of mostly western elites, constructed and maintained in relationship to a modernist discourse, fractured by its own internal hierarchies and claims to truth and maintaining a fragile balancing act between the forces of institutionalization by the culture industry on one side and
relegation to insignificance by the mass media industry on the other. My research will be conducted in two phases and will integrate archival and ethnographic data to be collected from the avant-garde community and institutions in New York City, historically and currently the city with the highest density of avant-garde filmmakers and avant-garde film screening venues.

Relationship of the work to basic research in anthropology and social science:

There have been three major theoretical premises influencing the study of art in the West: 1. The study of art worlds as spheres of economic activity  2. The study of art activity as embedded in larger cultural systems, as fields of production as institutional practice , or as deviance or 3. The study of art and art products as purveyors of the artist’s agency or as a result of psychological resistance . Despite an anthropological interest in aesthetics (the changing criteria by which art is made and judged as art) of non-western art (e.g. Coote and Shelton 1992), studies in Western art and anthropology have, by and large, focused on social and market forces and neglected aesthetics. There are exceptions. Born (1995) analyzes the changing aesthetics of avant-garde electronic music in France in relation to institutionalization, state funding, concepts of nationalism and competing musical discourses. Wheeler (2000) discusses the stylistic development of the field of performance art in relationship to Reagan and post-Reagan social and economic policy.

Exceptions can also be found in the work of Bourdieu where he sees assessment of art quality as an extension of class identity (1979), or as the result of negotiations of power and privilege in the 19th century French literary field (1993). For Bourdieu, vanguards in any artistic field must be considered as only one in a set of possible position takings in the larger field of production as a whole (1993). However, Thomas (2001), following Gell (1998) has critiqued Bourdieu for not adequately considering the agency of the artist and viewer in the instant of performing or viewing art as a part of the “work in action” of the art. Following this Strathernian understanding of objects as vehicles of agency and their circulation and consumption as the paths of agency, this research will bring together Bourdieu’s (1993) conception of a cultural field of production and recent anthropological understandings of art and agency (Gell 1998, Pinney and Thomas 2001) to assess not only how avant-garde films maintain avant-garde status vis a vis
mainstream production but also how the works themselves act as indexes of the agency of the filmmakers as well as facilitate the agency of the viewer to make meaning and participate in the community.

My investigation of the film avant-garde will posit a relationship between larger social and art world forces and changes in aesthetics within the avant-garde film community over time. In this regard, *aesthetics* is understood both as an *ideological* orientation concerning film construction and appreciation as well as formal *practice* of avant-garde filmmaking and discourse. It is my theory that changes in the aesthetics of individual avant-garde filmmakers are the result of attempts to negotiate status and secure symbolic profits, while changes in aesthetics of the entire field can be seen as efforts to maintain a boundary between avant-garde filmmaking and more mainstream practice. My research intersects with an ongoing interest in anthropology concerning institutions and power and the continued anthropological investigation of systems of domination and resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990, Fox and Starn 1997, Krohn-Hausen 1995, Ortner 1995) as I investigate the ways in which avant-garde members both pursue and resist institutionalization and the ways in which these negotiations are fueled by claims and counter-claims, alliances and conflicts. In light of the fact that these struggles are taking place within an elite group, it demonstrates that there is no one-way linear progression of ascent. Power, to make claims of authenticity and expertise, and resistance, making counter-claims must be seen as the interplay of non-egalitarian (because of always existing asymmetries of class, race, gender..) and mobile relations that are not super-structural, but embedded in and the immediate result of division, inequalities and unbalancing of other types of relationships.

While this research dovetails to some extent with some of the concerns of community of practice (CoP) literature (e.g. Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) in terms of localized knowledge acquisition and legitimation particularly for emerging filmmakers, more recent investigations concerning the applicability of the CoP model to dispersed communities re-enforces the necessity of face to face contact among Co-participants (e.g. Kimble, Hildreth and Wright 2001). While some in-person interactions seem to be important for reproduction in the film avant-garde, many members will never meet each other physically but will only interact with each others’ work and words. To investigate this, I will bring together two bodies of literature: anthropological texts on de-territorialized, imagined, and multi-sited communities and social
science theories concerning modernist and post-modernist discourses. Whereas literature on de-territorialized groups discusses imagined communities in terms of concepts of ethnicity or nationality with some relationship to a territory based on shared language and/or history of migration, the avant-garde is a discourse with no particular location. What locates the community is its relationship to a historical avant-garde inhabited by real subject/actors and their production as well as a history of modernist discourse about what it means to be avant-garde and produce avant-garde film. My research on the film avant-garde expands the anthropological conception of community to include one that is based both on aesthetic and ideological affinities (as opposed to ethnicity, class, gender) and exists across geographic and national boundaries.

Methodology:

The evidence needed to answer my primary research question will be collected from four sources: historical evidence from archives, published material (journals, listservs, screening notes), ethnographic data from a one-year fieldwork, and introspective data from my 10-year participation in the avant-garde film community as a filmmaker. Data from these sources will be collected in two phases, the first consisting of six months of library, archival and historical research and the second consisting of one year of ethnographic observations, focused and open-ended interviews, and some serial interviewing with key informants. Introspection and exploratory fieldwork (see training and preparedness) provided me with preliminary information to construct this research project, whose first phase (described below) is being funded by a Temple University Fellowship.

Phase I, June 1st 2002 to January 1st, 2003, will be devoted to the collection of historical and ethnographic data from several libraries and both personal and public archives focusing on books, journals and screening notes concerning the film avant-garde. The web will be searched using keywords to access websites of avant-garde film organizations, venues and makers and the primary avant-garde filmmaker listservs’ archives will be reviewed. From this research I will produce a structural/historical map of the field connecting the micro processes of individual filmmakers and their career trajectories with the social, ideological and physical changes of the field over time that will help me plot my ethnographic investigation into the contemporary community and how filmmakers use their aesthetic production as a means to make claims,
negotiate status, and achieve various goals.

Phase II, January 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2003 to December 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2003, for which I am seeking funding, will have four stages of data collection: 

1. From January through June I will attend the avant-garde film screening venues in New York City as well as the most important film festivals in the region and engage in participant-observation (e.g. Gusterson, 1996), primarily observing how avant-garde identity is collectively expressed, how status claims are made and negotiated within the avant-garde film community and how the boundary between avant-garde and mainstream film products are established and maintained. 

2. During this time, I will select and begin a longitudinal study of approximately twenty filmmakers (half residing in New York and half who move through there or whose films move through there on a semi-regular basis) conducting in-depth, serial interviewing (two hour interviews once every six to eight weeks for a year). Selection of these individuals will be based both on their self-description as avant-garde filmmakers and on their recognition by the group as such. In these interviews I will keep track of their ongoing exhibitions and experiences of success or failure, their personal historical relationship with/in the avant-garde, their perception of its borders and how they are maintained, and how their individual position in the avant-garde film community relates to their functioning in the larger culture within which they live. The purpose of this longitudinal study is to determine how individual’s perception of their own status and feelings of belonging change over time and how they use this information to make decisions regarding their career trajectory either pursuing further recognition in the avant-garde community, institutional employment, state funding, more mainstream exposure or any combination thereof.

3. In order to gain information on the connectedness of individuals in the community, if the community is subdivided into particular cliques or groups, how these groups are constituted, the power or influence of specific persons in the group, and the variety of relationships that exist in the group, I will use a “random walk design”, asking my collaborators for a list of their community relations from which two or three will be selected for interviews (totaling approximately 50-60 single meetings) focused specifically on their contemporary experience of the avant-garde community, its ideological, social and political basis, its exchange practices, and their own experience of status within the group. These interviews will take place from July through September. 

4. Although I will be located in New York City during the majority of my fieldwork as it exerts a certain hegemonic
control over the art world in general and the avant-garde film community in particular, it is important to travel to other major centers of avant-garde film production and reception. Despite New York’s historic and current dominance as the place with the most avant-garde film venues and filmmakers, there is a past and current practice of resistance to this centralization and contrary to Plattner’s findings in the world of contemporary art (1996) major festivals, centers and universities exist outside of New York that remain profoundly influential to the reproduction of avant-garde filmmakers and the constitution of the field in New York City and elsewhere. Therefore, from October through December I will participate in and attend film screenings and festivals outside of the New York area will allow me to investigate the multisided nature of the avant-garde film community and how films are circulated over long distances. At these screenings I will engage in participant observation as well as semi-structured interviews with selected consultants, focusing on why they are participating in the event, what symbolic profits they hope to gain, how they feel their participation may influence their position in the group and how the event itself represents the avant-garde film community. Of primary concern during these trips outside of New York is observing how these festivals serve to as locations to make status claims and maintain community boundaries. When given the opportunity I will engage in the screening of my own most recent film, increasing my “insider” status, building trust, and eliciting more data from colleagues as they discuss my work.

**Training and preparedness:**

Two of my avant-garde films are in distribution, my work has been screened internationally and I have received honors including the best experimental film award at the 1999 Athens International Film Festival. This status helped me gain entry and receive a full scholarship in the competitive MFA film program at Temple University in 1996. Following the completion of my MFA in film I was accepted into the PhD program in Anthropology at Temple University and received a University Fellowship funding my coursework. In February 2002, I completed my qualifying exams in the anthropology of visual communication, North America, and modernity focusing on the interconnections between art and media production, political economy, subject formation, institutions and power.
My relationship with the film avant-garde began in 1989 during my undergraduate education, when I began making what I would come to recognize (and have others recognize) as avant-garde films. After receiving my BA in film in 1991 I co-founded an organization, Pinhole Cinema Project, with the specific goal of bringing more avant-garde films and filmmakers to the Pacific Northwest. During its three year existence, the Project was given a home by 911 Media Arts Center, in Seattle WA and was funded through them by grants from the Washington State Council on the Arts and the Andy Warhol foundation among others. This early experience of curating, grant writing, and advertising exposed me to the complexities of relationships with other art world elites, state and private funding agencies and filmmakers. During that time I was introduced to the history and networks of the avant-garde film community. I watched all of the films I could program and read all of the books I could find. I was in weekly contact with avant-garde filmmakers and curators all over the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. Many filmmakers slept on the floor of my apartment. I was also producing my own work and attempting to distribute it through the same networks with uneven success. Making work and getting it shown required depending on networks of local filmmakers for equipment and help in production and larger national and international venues and festivals for screening. It was during this time that I realized the asymmetrical relations of power within the local and international communities that were being contested by women and others. There are books written on the subject by feminist scholars, some re-inscribing women into the existing history and some critiquing the social situations and constraints that kept women from being as productive as men.

In 1993 I moved to New York City to live the life of an experimental filmmaker. To support myself, I worked in the New York’s commercial film industry working as an animator’s assistant, a grip and a gaffer. While working in the mainstream film industry, I was exposed to the extremely marginalized position of avant-garde film in the larger field and the homogeneity of expectations for film entertainment, whether the film be independently or corporately funded. Only a handful of co-workers even knew what avant-garde film was and even fewer had seen any. Those who had were inclined to dismiss the work as amateurish or conversely overly intellectual and/or unentertaining. It was during this time that my interested in studying the film avant-garde as a field of social production began. In 1996 I received a full scholarship to pursue
a Masters of Fine Arts in Film at Temple University and in 1999 I began the PhD program in anthropology at Temple University.

During graduate study in the Anthropology department at Temple I have completed two research projects that pertain to this study: a reception study of avant-garde film using semiotic analysis and a cross cultural analysis of the ways in which avant-garde filmmakers use urban space and negotiate economic constraints (on the affordability of property) state institutions (of funding and censorship) and the forces of gentrification. This later research involved conducting several interviews with persons from Belgium, London, Toronto, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and of course, New York and helped me select New York from among other major urban locations as the one that most outside filmmakers visited regularly for film screenings. During this preliminary research I have also reviewed all the significant literature and while there has been a proliferation of texts in the past thirty years on the history and theory of the film avant-garde, how it functions as resistive cultural production and how its practitioners participate in socially critical discourses around gender, identity, censorship and representation, there has been no text, anthropological or otherwise, that considers a systematic study of avant-garde film as a field of social production.

My work with Pinhole Cinema Project, my success as a filmmaker within the avant-garde community, and this recent research on avant-garde filmmakers and urban space have enabled me to develop a wide ranging network of avant-garde filmmaker, venue and festival contacts. In addition, through the generosity of a Temple University Research Fellowship, as of January 1st 2003 I will have completed Phase I, the history and archival portion of my research, and will be prepared to begin Phase II, the ethnographic research.

Conclusion:

This research will contribute to basic research in anthropology in several ways. First, it will make a theoretical contribution to the study of elites by revealing that not only can elite communities be fractured from within by competing discourses, but that some elite practices and groups are marginalized from mainstream culture. Their elite status notwithstanding, avant-garde filmmakers in New York City and elsewhere remain marginalized by the dominant film industry. Nevertheless, members of the avant-garde community are not of one voice about their condition:
They vie for status within their community, compete for institutional positions and funding, and engage in an ongoing community-wide debate about what it means to be avant-garde, about the possible institutionalization of their practice, and about ways of maintaining a boundary between their practice and mainstream cinema and art production. The second contribution of this study will be to extend the anthropological considerations of modernist discourses beyond their current purview in contexts of “development” or colonization or as a social and/or economic force in the West by joining it with the literature on de-territorialized communities (Anderson 1983, Appadurai 1990, Gupta and Ferguson 1997) to investigate the film avant-garde as a community based in aesthetic discourse occurring across borders and despite differences in language. Third, by focusing on the exchange practices of the artist, their pursuit of symbolic profits and avant-garde status and how this intersects with art world legitimation and standardization, my research will bring a new perspective to the anthropological study of art in the West. Until now art in the west has been conceived within the social sciences as driven by market forces class positioning modernist rationalities and psychological resistance and deviance. One reason why avant-garde film products may be able to resist both institutionalization and commodification by the mainstream film industry lies in the avant-garde films inability to be objectified and marketed like other art and media products. Wealthy patrons cannot purchase an avant-garde film and place it on their wall as a marker of taste and style as they might with a painting or sculpture and there is no popular audience for avant-garde film. Instead, within the avant-garde film community, both social and economic marginalization are valorized. Because of this marginalization what remains central for the avant-garde film community is their constant reinvestigation of what it means to be avant-garde, their persistence in creating films that do not transfer into monetary gain and their pursuit of avant-garde status. Studying the film avant-garde as a resilient system of exchange where objects - created out of persons - and the exchange of these objects that continues to reaffirm the centrality of the social actor’s agency in production and consumption gives me an opportunity to study an system of exchange amongst western elites that is not based in the commodity logic of capitalism.

Bibliography


