

Perspectives



on British



Avant-Garde



Film



Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film Hayward Gallery 2 March-24 April 1977

Arts Council
of Great Britain



Introduction

The purpose in showing the series of film programmes titled 'Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film' is to survey the films funded by the Arts Council through its Artists' Films Committee and to place them in an historical and critical context of avant-garde film practice.

The contention is not that the film work funded by the committee is synonymous with the avant-garde in Britain today, but that most film-makers working in this area have been or are currently in receipt of financial support from the committee. Consequently the films funded by the committee, and prior to its formation in 1972 on an ad-hoc basis by the Art Film Committee, form a useful starting point from which to gain a perspective on the ideas and methods that have, over the last few years, formed the basis of what is termed 'avant-garde film'.

The method devised to show the films in order to bring out these points is to divide the films into two groups which are then arranged into hour-long programmes illustrating particular themes. The first group is of films funded by the committee. The second sub-divides into two sections – a series of historical programmes and a critical survey of current work. In addition to the one-hour programmes that constitute the bulk of the films shown there are screenings of longer films such as Michael Snow's "Rameau's Nephew", and committee-funded work that requires special projection – usually with the film-maker present – known as Expanded Cinema.

The survey is not intended to be comprehensive either in terms of films financed by the committee or the historical and critical programmes. Rather, the groups of films and the programme notes about them are intended to demonstrate the changing nature of the films funded by the committee, to show some of the central historical developments and to indicate some of the major aesthetic and ideological concerns that underlie current avant-garde film-making in Britain and abroad.

Selection of Programmes

The selection of the funded films is intended to exemplify the range of the films supported, and is arranged into thematic groups suggested by the films themselves. However, the groups illustrate different approaches to certain problems or subject areas rather than demonstrating a common aim or aesthetic. Some of the thematic groups also reflect the chronology of their making so that, for example, films by visual artists documenting their work were, on the whole, funded prior to 1972 whilst landscape films have become a prominent concern in the last two or three years. However, chronology is not a dominant element in the programming as the chief concern has been to select films that relate to and reflect on each other.

The historical programmes have been selected to provide a context for the funded films and their extension: the six critical programmes of current British work. Of course, the division between historical and critical programmes is not a neat one, history extending to 1976 and current work going back to 1967. In some programmes films made decades apart have been put together to explore a particular aesthetic theme. The idea behind thematic grouping is to indicate the major historical concerns of avant-garde film-making with particular reference to the theories and practice of today. Sometimes this involves direct relationships of ideas or techniques, but at others concerns and methods that are no longer much in evidence.

Some of the thematic grouping and juxtaposition of films will, it is hoped, provoke discussion and re-assessment of the importance of certain historical developments.

The basic shape of the survey and its constituent parts was devised in the course of discussion by the Artists' Film Committee. Some of the thematic programmes were selected by discussion, while individual members of the committee selected programmes of particular interest to them. Others were selected by invited critics and film makers. The programme notes contain the appropriate credits.

A note on programme notes

Every programme is accompanied by notes or an essay, available at the screening, that elucidate the issues hinted at in this general introduction. The idea is to focus on specific concerns, historical and current, aesthetic and ideological, and relate the way film-makers have dealt with problems arising from these concerns. The specific nature of the notes depends on the individual contributors and no attempt has been made to create a consistent attitude or style. The notes reflect the diversity of concerns and interests rather than a single analytical viewpoint. However, the collated writings should form the basis for a substantial understanding of the avant-garde film.

Scheduling

The exhibition of films runs for seven weeks and three days. Fridays are closed for maintenance and preparation for expanded cinema. In working out the scheduling it seemed academic to follow any fixed pattern of, say, a chronological nature. Instead, having decided on the number and starting times of the programmes on each day, the plan was to make interesting juxtapositions so that a wide variety of films were shown on any one date. Saturdays have been reserved for expanded cinema. A complete schedule detailing all the programmes is available.

Certification

In accordance with GLC rules of management all of the films shown at the Hayward require a censor's certificate. Although entrance to the film programme is free there is an admission charge to the Gallery and in consequence, the screenings are subject to the current licensing laws for public film exhibition. Due to the large number of films, the shortness of time in which to organise the exhibition and the difficulties in envigilation at the gallery it was decided to have just two categories of programmes. Those to which children can be admitted and those for adults only. This has resulted in a number of films being placed in an adult's only category which is inappropriate to the content or intention of the film.

The Artists' Films Committee

Introduction

As with all Arts Council committees this one receives applications within its terms of reference and having decided which of them it wishes to support makes recommendations to the Council. The Council then makes the decision as to whether the award will be made.

Applications consist of written information about the project to be undertaken and relevant background information about the applicant. Guidelines are available that state the Committee's terms of reference and the nature of the information the Committee requires to make a decision. Related visual material, particularly previous filmwork is seen during the meetings.

Membership

Current members of the committee:

Professor Stuart Hood – Chairman

Ian Christie

David Curtis

Simon Field

Laura Mulvey

Tony Rayns

Caroline Tisdall

Current Funding Activities

The Committee's present methods of support fall into two groups: production of film and video and their exhibition.

Production

In funding the production of film and video there are two methods of support, both for material costs only:

Bursaries

These are of three fixed amounts, £300; £750; and £1250. Bursaries are not for the making of a specific film but for work in progress, to be used at the film-makers' discretion as necessary, eg. to complete or modify films already started, to continue experimenting with certain techniques or whatever is most appropriate to the work being undertaken. The three amounts are not intended to reflect an assessment of worthiness but to provide appropriate financial support for different levels of development. Therefore differing criteria are used for the various amounts. The smallest is for those who have recently left college, or are just beginning film-making, and have not actually completed many films. The middle amount is for those with a number of films completed and in progress and the largest for those whose work and ideas are well developed.

Awards

Awards are available for specific projects that are precisely budgeted and the amount of financial support is determined by the costs of making the film.

Annual Bursaries

As video production has different requirements from film the committee is engaged in finding appropriate methods of supporting it. One solution has been a bursary made in association with the Royal College of Art that provides access to the Film & Television Department's video equipment over a period of one year. An additional scheme will be launched this spring in association with Maidstone College of Art providing access to a comprehensive black and white video studio.

Exhibitions

The Committee is aware of the need to ensure not only that films are made but that there is the opportunity for them to be seen. There is also one particular kind of film – expanded cinema – that is essentially a form of exhibition. The work may consist of a gallery installation, a film with live performers interacting with it, multi-projection pieces and so on. The methods of support are as follows.

Expanded Cinema

Awards for individuals or small groups to mount expanded cinema shows and video installations in specific locations.

Festivals

Awards for major festivals of avant-garde, experimental film and video such as the 1st Festival of Independent British Film at Bristol, the Derby Film Awards, the Festival of Expanded Cinema at the ICA and the Forum on the Avant-Garde at the Edinburgh Film Festival.

Film-makers on Tour

This is a scheme devised to offset the costs of showing expanded cinema and to encourage more shows to take place. Eight film-makers have been selected by the Committee to reflect the diversity of work supported. The Arts Council subsidises the showings so that the cost to bookers per event is only £10 and projectors are provided where necessary.

Full details of all the methods of support are available from the Film Officer, the Arts Council of Great Britain, 105 Piccadilly, London, W1.

History and Background of the Artists' Films Committee

The first "artists' films" were financed in 1969 by the Art Film Committee out of funds provided by Council primarily for films about art. The intention was to recognise the way that existing delineations between the arts were breaking down and to treat film-making as an art activity. But two different concepts of film competing for the same fund was increasingly unsatisfactory and in 1972 a special sub-committee was set up – the Artists Films Committee – with a member of the parent committee as Chairman but with its own terms of reference and its own allocation of funds.

Prior to 1972 'artists films' had on the whole been interpreted as meaning personal documentaries by practising fine-artists. The priorities were already changing when the committee was formed and today it could be said that the terms of reference are broadly interpreted as investigation and experiment into the language and meaning of film within the context of avant-garde film practice.

Past membership of the committee

1972

Alan Bowness – Chairman
Richard Cork
Douglas Lowndes
George Melly
Sam Rohdie
Colin Young

1973

Alan Bowness – Chairman
David Curtis
Richard Cork
Sam Rohdie
Colin Young

1974

Stuart Hood – Chairman
David Curtis
Caroline Fawkes
Simon Field
Tony Rayns
Colin Young

1975

Stuart Hood – Chairman
Ian Christie
David Curtis
Simon Field
Laura Mulvey
Tony Rayns

This list reflects the membership of the committee at the end of each year.

Rodney Wilson
Film Officer
February 1977