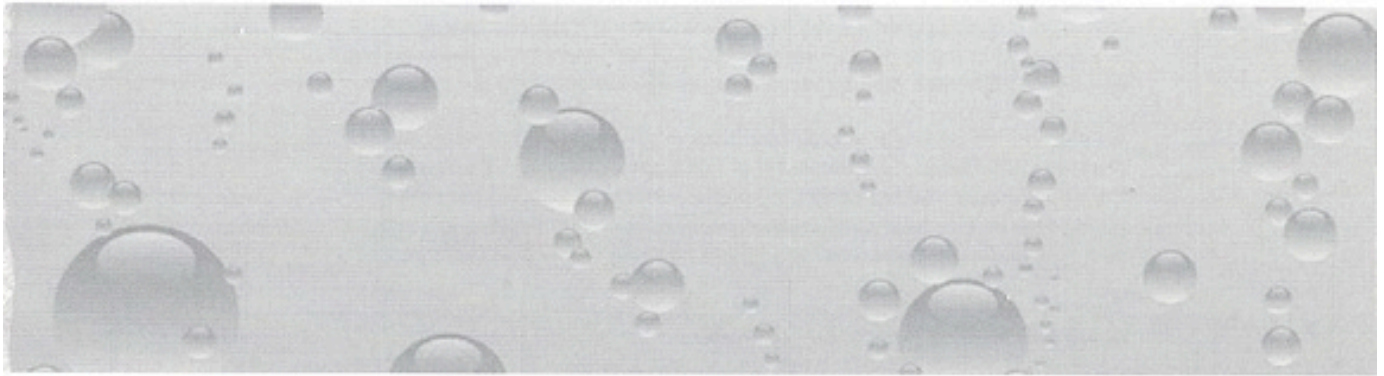


# Swimming Upstream



## A Lifesaving Guide to Short Film Distribution

Sharon Badal



AMSTERDAM • BOSTON • HEIDELBERG • LONDON  
NEW YORK • OXFORD • PARIS • SAN DIEGO  
SAN FRANCISCO • SINGAPORE • SYDNEY • TOKYO

Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier



5. Internet. The Internet is back, and this time to stay. I've done a lot of deals with AtomFilms, and now with iTunes, iPods, and such, it looks like a whole new market.
6. Merchandise. I sell all my work, usually on my web site or in stores—my DVD collections, books, posters, T-shirts, music, even original art. I've got a special deal, where for \$125, you can purchase the Bill Plympton Super Fan Package—everything I've ever done. It sells very well.
7. Commissioned work. Occasionally I'll do outside work, if it's fun and pays well. I've done a number of commercials, for Geico, United Airlines, Taco Bell, etc. I've done music videos for Madonna, Kanye West, and "Weird Al" Yankovic, and then sometimes I do trailers or bits for feature films like *Fuck: A Documentary*.
8. Appearances. I often do lectures about "Surviving as an Independent Filmmaker," for example, at schools, corporations, film festivals, and conventions.

So, you see, there are many ways to make money on short films. Just remember my Plympton's *Dogma*—short, cheap, and funny.

---

JON GARTENBERG is a film archivist, distributor, and programmer, who has been actively engaged in the experimental film world for several decades. Formerly a curator at The Museum of Modern Art, he acquired avant-garde movies for the permanent collection of the Department of Film and restored the films of Andy Warhol. Currently, his company, Gartenberg Media Enterprises, distributes experimental films on DVD and licenses clips from these films for documentaries on Andy Warhol, Bob Dylan, and other cultural figures. He advises independent filmmakers on placing their works into the commercial distribution and exhibition network. Jon is the programmer of experimental and underground films for the Tribeca Film Festival. He can be reached at [jon@gartenbergmedia.com](mailto:jon@gartenbergmedia.com).

---

## The Fragile Emotion

*By Jon Gartenberg*

*Introduction: What is an experimental film?*

- \* One of the most vibrant, yet underexposed, currents of the short film format is experimental filmmaking, which has historically also been

referred to as avant-garde film, underground movies, expanded cinema, and visionary film. Experimental filmmakers create their works as labors of love, in the pure spirit of self-expression, without regard for financial profit, or to use as a calling card to Hollywood. Making experimental films is most often a solitary experience by a single individual, without benefit of a cast or crew. The hand of the artist is privileged, so that the seamless illusion of reality in commercial cinema is rejected in favor of techniques that expose the filmmaking process itself. In fact, production “mistakes” are often incorporated into the fabric of individual avant-garde movies. Linear narrative is subverted in order to foreground other ways of perceiving the flow of cinematic time and space, resulting in the expression of motifs related more to poetry, music, and subjective, psychological thought patterns.

Experimental filmmakers begin with observations of the world around them, but process these experiences through their subjective mind’s eye, often resulting in films of abstraction. Avant-garde movies are replete with flickering frames, individual shots deliberately under- and overexposed, accelerated and slowed-down motion, repeated and looped frames and images, and attention to the grain (of films shot on celluloid) and the individual pixels (of works created on digital video). When, in the early 1970s, Jonas Mekas tutored young John and Caroline Kennedy in filmmaking—an experience which was later compiled in Mekas’ own film, *This Side of Paradise* (1999)—Jackie O. wrote him that she never knew that movie cameras could zoom in and out, and speed up and slow down action, which, in her children’s hands, now could produce poetic effects. Numerous experimental films are also created via direct film processes (i.e., painting directly onto the emulsion, or exposing objects onto the raw film stock without running the film through the camera). For example, Stan Brakhage’s *Chartres Series* (1994), an abstract, hand-painted film of vivid colors, is a meditation on his experience of visiting the famous cathedral, while *Black Ice* (1994) conveys the artist’s mind’s-eye sense of slipping on the frozen surface.

Many avant-garde filmmakers are still committed to working in the ever-shrinking universe of small-gauge celluloid film stocks (e.g., 8 mm, Super 8 mm, and 16 mm). Thematically and texturally, many of these artists deliberately link the extinction of these film stocks both with their own tenuous existence as avant-garde filmmakers and with the fragile state of human affairs. To further underscore this concept, a recent trend by numerous filmmakers has been to treat the image with chemical processes. Highlighting a sense of environmental decay,

these filmmakers directly impress their delicate emotions onto the sensitive surface of the film emulsion.

### *A brief history of experimental filmmaking*

The formal beginning of the avant-garde moviemaking tradition extends back to the 1920s in Europe, where it intersected with art movements in painting and photography. In the United States, a parallel experimental filmmaking effort arose, with the production of such key films as *Manhatta* (1921), *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), and *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* (1928). In *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra*, the filmmakers employ minimal sets and avant-garde filmmaking techniques to parody the depersonalized, assembly-line nature of Hollywood moviemaking. *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), made by dancer Maya Deren (and photographed by Alexander Hammid), is considered by many to be the most emblematic avant-garde movie ever made, because it clearly pointed to a new direction in visual expression, moving away from a strict linear narrative and toward a visual style incorporating self-reflexive images refracted through mirrors and windowpanes, repetition of shots and disjunctive editing, and the foregrounding of subjective states of mind suffused with sexual desire and repression. A more active avant-garde filmmaking tradition developed in the United States during the immediately post-World War II era. In the ensuing decades, the practice of experimental filmmaking fully exploded, culminating in the 1960s in New York, when Andy Warhol's twin-screen epic film *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) burst above ground. Over time, the experimental filmmaking practice has evolved and matured into many different stylistic threads and directions by an extensive underground network of artists. The numerous established subgenres in which these filmmakers work include found footage and animation, films of the body, structural films and film diaries, landscape and portrait films, film and video installations, and performances incorporating projections of moving images with live music or dance.

Made outside the commercial mainstream, experimental filmmakers function apart from the built-in production constraints of the Hollywood system. Avant-garde artists are able to freely address provocative political themes, explore outlandish subjects, and frankly depict nudity and sex. However, the public projection of this kind of work has, on occasion, run the risk of encountering censorship problems. When Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), replete with shots of naked, writhing bodies, transvestites, and other theatrical

characters, was shown in New York City, police raided the theater and impounded the film.

Even though experimental filmmaking functions completely outside the commercial film economy, the historical interweaving of the two traditions is in reality quite strong. Many avant-garde artists have studied commercial cinema in some detail, in order to employ techniques and formal strategies to subvert narrative in their own films. One of the most proficient avant-garde students of Hollywood film was Warren Sonbert, who wrote about such classic filmmakers as Alfred Hitchcock and Douglas Sirk. The Hollywood cinema has appropriated visual styles of avant-garde films, including the abstract films of Jordan Belson and Ed Emshwiller, that inspired moments from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The visual aesthetic of Mark Romanek, the director of *One Hour Photo* (2002), starring Robin Williams, was profoundly influenced by Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963), which he saw as a teenager. Moreover, the pioneering styles so ever-present in avant-garde films (including image and sound counterpoints, the use of superimpositions and multiple images shown in the same frame, accelerated and slow motion, and rapid montage) can all be seen as precursors to MTV and reality television.

### *Getting involved in production*

Experimental filmmakers produce their works on shoestring budgets. Some artists obtain production grants from local and state arts councils, and others supplement their filmmaking activities with income from unrelated day jobs, as film production teachers at universities, or as professional film editors for sponsored films. Many seasoned experimental filmmakers welcome interns from film school to help in their day-to-day production activity. Certain universities also have production faculty proficient in teaching experimental filmmaking; a few such colleges of note are Bard College and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

### *Exhibition, distribution, and broadcast opportunities*

As difficult as finding a market for short narrative films or documentaries is, the economy for experimental film exists even more outside the commercial mainstream.

Since their films are not about making money, the filmmakers' main focus is on exposure to get their work seen. Whereas commercial films are fixed in form and replicated many times for maximum exposure in

theater chains, on DVD, and for broadcast, experimental films historically have most often existed only as single copies, which were at various times altered in form by filmmakers from screening to screening.

Experimental filmmakers view themselves first and foremost as artists, rather than as moviemakers. As such, they often also create works in other media of visual expression, including photography, painting, and drawing. They frequently generate still-life artworks as by-products of their filmmaking process. A few moving image artists have been fortunate to show in galleries where their works can command high prices. However, artists working in the true historic tradition of experimental filmmaking fall outside the gallery and art world universe, which is focused more today on product and personality than on process and creativity.

Numerous experimental filmmakers working in the short film format have gone on to produce feature-length avant-garde movies. The economic opportunity for these films to get commercial distribution is rare, indeed; some features garnering prizes at film festivals fail to secure theatrical distribution. Filmmakers who produce their movies in digital format are nowadays also confronted with the added cost of a conversion to 35 mm film, even for short films that are eventually shown in theaters.

There is a tight-knit network of venues where experimental films are programmed. This tradition extends at least back to the 1940s in the United States, when a mix of European avant-garde, international classics, and experimental shorts were regularly screened through the Art in Cinema programs at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the University of California, Berkeley (1946–1954), and through Cinema 16 at various venues in New York City (1947–1963).

Today, many film festivals worldwide are committed to showing at least some experimental works. In the United States, these include The New York Film Festival, the Tribeca Film Festival, TIE (the International Experimental Cinema Exposition), the San Francisco Film Festival, the Chicago Underground Film Festival, the Ann Arbor Film Festival, the New York Underground Film Festival, Mix, and LA Freewaves Experimental Media Art Festival, and in Europe and elsewhere, the Oberhausen Film Festival and the Berlin Film Festival (Germany), the Rotterdam Film Festival (the Netherlands), the Toronto International Film Festival (Canada), and the Torino Film Festival (Italy), among others.

There is also an extensive network of nonfestival exhibition venues, which are committed to showing avant-garde works. In the United States, these include museums, universities, libraries, galleries, and

alternative spaces, such as microcinemas, lofts, storefronts, film cooperatives, music clubs, independent theaters, and informal gatherings of filmmakers showing new works to each other. An international list of venues showing experimental films, together with a weekly schedule of exhibitions, can be found on the Flickr web site ([www.hi-beam.net/cgi-bin/flicker.pl](http://www.hi-beam.net/cgi-bin/flicker.pl)).

Historically, experimental films and videos have been primarily distributed via film and video cooperatives. In the United States, these include Canyon Cinema (San Francisco) and The New York Film-Maker's Cooperative, as well as Electronic Arts Intermix (New York) and Video Data Bank (Chicago). In Europe, there are parallel cooperatives in countries including England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden and also in Canada. Boutique film distributors such as Zeitgeist Films and First Run/Icarus Films have occasionally released more high-profile experimental works, primarily feature length, by world-renowned avant-garde artists such as Guy Madden, as well as documentaries about well-known experimental filmmakers, including Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, and Marie Menken.

Increasingly, artists' works are published and distributed on DVD by boutique presses or through self-distribution. Anthologies of avant-garde cinema have been published recently on DVD by Kino Video and Image Entertainment; Re:Voir has published works by numerous experimental artists; and other publishers have put out works by individual artists, including Kenneth Anger (Fantoma), Stan Brakhage (Criterion), Maya Deren (Mystic Fire Video), Su Friedrich (Peripheral Produce), John Canemaker (Milestone Film & Video), Oskar Fischinger (Center for Visual Music), Mike Kuchar (Other Cinema), and Bill Morrison (Plexifilm).

Experimental films are rarely shown on television, although on occasion, selected works have been broadcast on the Sundance Channel and on 13/WNET in the United States and on the Arte network in Europe. Experimental filmmakers often take broadcast matters into their own hands, showing their works on public access television or making them available as video-on-demand through the new Internet technology, via such outlets as iTunes, YouTube, and UbuWeb.

### *Conclusion: Working against the commercial grain*

Experimental filmmakers work against the tide of commercial feature films and narrative shorts. These filmmakers are richly rewarded in the personal fulfillment their craft provides and in reaching out to a receptive audience who yearn for more challenging cinematic fare.