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A Brief History

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# The Digital Avant-Garde: A Brief History

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*Abstract: An exhaustive amount of literature has been dedicated to the study, critique, and analysis of the modernist avant-garde movement, with a predominant emphasis on cinematic practices. Consequently, the research concern herein is not in discussing the avant-garde in the traditional sense, but rather, in re-contextualizing and redefining the avant-garde as it fits within the domain of twenty-first century art that is created, distributed, and/or consumed via digital means. To begin the process of re-contextualization, I trace the history of the avant-garde as an artistic movement, as well as discuss the advent of various digital technologies and the shift from analog art to digital. My hope is to not only outline the building blocks in order to develop a clear and concise definition of the digital avant-garde, but to also illustrate that an avant-garde movement is very much alive in the new millennium, but we may have been searching for it in all the wrong places.*

*Keywords: Digital Avant-Garde, Modernist Avant-Garde, Digital Media Art*

## Introduction

An exhaustive amount of literature has been dedicated to the study, critique, and analysis of the modernist avant-garde movement, with a predominant emphasis on cinematic practices. Consequently, my research concern is not in discussing the avant-garde in the traditional sense, but rather, in re-contextualizing and redefining the avant-garde as it fits within the domain of twenty-first century art that is created, distributed, and/or consumed via digital means. At the beginning stages, my research is historical in nature and primarily focused on the visual arts, with a strong emphasis on the moving image; thus, my discussion of the digital avant-garde, as of now, is not directly concerned with other mediums such as sound or written text. To begin re-contextualizing the avant-garde, I trace the history of the avant-garde as an artistic movement, as well as discuss the advent of various digital technologies and the shift from analog art to digital. My hope is to not only outline the building blocks by which to develop a clear and concise definition of the digital avant-garde, which does not yet exist, but also to illustrate that an avant-garde movement is very much alive in the new millennium, but we may have been searching for it in all the wrong places.

In many ways, the digital avant-garde (DAG) strongly diverges from the traditional notion of the modernist avant-garde (MAG), as the DAG is more concerned with the manipulation and flow of information, rather than its creation, and generally functions outside the confines of academia and mainstream culture. Thus, addressing the avant-garde in the realm of digital art practices requires more than a simple re-contextualization of our traditional notions of the modernist avant-garde, as the DAG is not a continuation, but a divergence from the MAG. It is insufficient to extrapolate the core ideals and methodologies from the MAG, and apply them to digital art practices; doing so would imply ignorance in understanding that our society has changed significantly in the last 70 years. In turn, I hesitantly use the term “avant-garde,” as my research points to a contemporary definition that is dissimilar to the MAG art movement. Furthermore, it is important to note that this research project is not directly empirical in nature, but rather theoretically focused and within the initial stages of investigation of a largely ignored, but relevant subtopic of art and media history.

## The Modernist Avant-Garde

I begin by discussing and defining the modernist avant-garde, as we must understand its origins, methodology and key players before we can move into our discussion of, what I refer to as, the digital avant-garde. The MAG set out to “cast the familiar in a new light,” and was often times disliked or, at the very least, distrusted by bodies of government (Nichols 2001, 583).

Documentary film theorist Bill Nichols describes that, “from the vantage point of the avant-garde, the state and issue of citizenship were obscured by questions of perception and consciousness, aesthetics and ethics, behavior and the unconscious, actions and desire” (2001, 583). By creating works that questioned authority, identity, art and politics, the MAG served as a reaction against bourgeois society, while simultaneously becoming elitist in its own right. The modernist avant-garde became elitist, as it created specific art circles dependent on the wealthy, which happened to be generally confined to a few geographic locations such as the U.S., France and Russia.

In his seminal essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg discusses the inherent paradox between the modernist avant-garde and high/low culture. The avant-garde was elitist in content and audience, but it was the ruling class that actually determined and consumed culture, not the wealthy. For Greenberg, the avant-garde belonged to the ruling class, even though it was the elite who enjoyed it. So the paradox remains: the avant-garde should be for the people, and it may fool itself into thinking that it actually was, when in fact, the MAG was dependent on the bourgeois for financial support. In turn, the avant-garde never experienced a true “emigration” or detachment from bourgeois society. “No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold” (Greenberg 1939, 4).

A few key players in the modernist avant-garde include American visual artists such as Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, Joseph Cornell, Robert Mapplethorpe, Kenneth Anger, Diane Arbus, Andy Warhol, Bruce Conner, and Jonas Mekas. In addition to the aforementioned artists, there are dozens of other visual avant-gardists, both famous and not, as well numerous more who are not American and/or did the bulk of their work outside of the United States (i.e. Sergei Eisenstein, Luis Buñuel, Man Ray and Jean-Luc Godard). Since the avant-garde encompasses such a broad definition, I decided to limit my discussion primarily to the MAG visual art movements occurring in Russia during the 1910s-20s and in the U.S. in 1960s. In no way is my exclusion of other mediums, geographic locations or artists an attempt to limit the definition of the MAG in such a way as to diminish its overall influence on subsequent art movements.

Avant-garde films are famous for being challenging to understand and at times being so fragmented and apparently nonsensical, that the audience may be utterly lost in any attempt made at comprehending the visuals or the storyline. Many MAG filmmakers and photographers created projects that reflected their personal or political views on a number of given subjects, ranging from surrealist dreams (*Meshes of the Afternoon* by Maya Deren) to the birth of one’s child (*Window Water Baby Moving* by Stan Brakhage). Films were made cheaply, often using discarded or found footage, as well as using less cost-prohibitive film stock such as 8mm or 16mm, rather than the Hollywood standard of 35mm. In turn, MAG films are known for their grainy and poor production value, often times using black and white film stock, as well as their overall amateur or non-professional quality.

In turn, the modernist avant-garde covered a wide range of aesthetic styles and socio political agendas. Below is a list of several traditional qualities of the MAG, which range from theoretical beliefs to the types of materials used in the production process:

- Was a reaction to bourgeois society, but simultaneously elitist.
- Functioned outside of the mainstream, but eventually became and/or determined mainstream art.
- Highly influential to subsequent art practices.
- In relation to cinema specifically, narrative storylines were absent or difficult to understand.
- Art works generally considered original and innovative.
- Art was scholarly in nature, creating strong ties with theory and the academy.

- Many times works carried a political agenda.
- Used cheap or discarded technologies such as 8mm or 16mm film stock.
- Often employed found footage, nudity, and other shocking or strange images.

## Art and the Advent of the Digital

I am not directly interested in the modernist avant-garde, aside from the need to discuss it in order to provide a historical foundation and appropriate level of context, to what may or may not be, avant-garde practices occurring in the digital domain. Moving forward from the discussion of the MAG, it is important to note the advent of digital technologies and how it changed the world of art. Doing so provides a stronger trajectory to how we may have arrived at a digital avant-garde movement. Thus, while computing technologies may date as far back as the mid-20th century, I am concerned with computing and other digital technologies that directly affect the user. The development of the personal computer in the late 1970s and early 80s (e.g. Apple II), was followed by image manipulation software in the late 80s (e.g. Adobe Photoshop). The eventual proliferation of the Internet in the 90s, and the advent of high definition video in the late 90s, and early 2000s, have undoubtedly altered the way we produce, distribute and consume visual media and art.

Herein, my focal points are photography and film – two mediums that have changed significantly in the last few decades, primarily through the evolution of technology. For example, video installation art pioneered by artist Nam June Paik can now be considered, in many ways, obsolete, at least in terms of its technological components (e.g. TV monitors). Video is an analog technology that is generally no longer used; however, this is not to say that video artists are no longer at work. Bill Viola, known for his brilliant and meticulous stop-motion work, has ironically made the switch from one analog technology (video) to another (35mm). However, even with individual artists making shifts between different forms of analog and/or digital technologies, where does that leave cinematic practices as a whole?

British filmmaker Peter Greenaway famously proclaimed, “Cinema is dead; long live cinema” (qtd. in Willis 2005, 1). Greenaway believes that cinema died on September 31st, 1983 with the introduction of the remote control (Greenaway 2007). He no longer refers to himself as a filmmaker, but rather as an image-maker, who remixes visuals in a variety of different contexts, primarily using technologies and methods employed within the VJ (Visual Jockey) and DJ (Disk Jockey) culture. He believes that the narrative form of Hollywood cinema is dead, and we must move towards a cinematic experience involving a level of interactivity from the audience, as well as the incorporation of multimedia. Much of what Greenaway describes is what I believe to be at the core of the digital avant-garde.

Some may find Greenaway’s proclamation to be slightly exaggerated; nonetheless, he points to an ongoing conflict in the realm of cinema and digital technology. For many, the turn of the millennium marked the end of film (in analog format), but it also marked the beginning of film (in digital format). For example, the Internet has proliferated a robust remix culture, one that Lawrence Lessig is famous for supporting, and many digital technologies, such as digital photography or smart phones, have easily turned consumers into producers. I am in agreement with Greenaway’s assertion that the cinema is both alive and dead, and how a new, more exciting and interactive style of cinema, both on and off the screen, is precisely the direction that image making should take. However, image making, as Greenaway describes, is still in the periphery of mainstream culture, which is the key underlying reason for my argument in support of the idea that there is an avant-garde movement happening today, but it has diverged from its modernist predecessor.

## Shifting Gears: Analog to Digital

I have spent a bit of time discussing the advent of digital technologies and its varied influence on the visual arts, but what about the shift from analog to digital? While the analysis of a shift from analog to digital brings about a number of subsequent questions, such as issues of materiality, perceptions of reality, and even interactivity, we must first understand what differentiates analog from digital. Thus, I will begin by defining these two terms and their relationship to the moving image. Two technologies discussed so far are analog video and celluloid film, both of which capture information in unique ways, but ultimately display recorded information in analogous ways to the original. Digital video, however, follows an entirely different process.

Celluloid film “simultaneously captures and records light as it comes through the lens and strikes the emulsion of each frame of celluloid,” in turn leaving a material imprint. On the other hand, with analog video the “light strikes a sensor, such as a cathode ray tube...which momentarily captures a representation of light. The camera then transmits an analogue signal...such as electrical signals...which are collected and held on the magnetic tape” (Willis 2005, 5). While film and analog video capture information differently, they both display the final information using a process of transcription. As Timothy Binkley explains, “analogue media store information through some kind of transcription which transfers the configuration of one physical material into an analogous arrangement in another” (1993, 94).

Additionally, the “physical” nature of analog media also brings into question the notion of reality. To some scholars, such as André Bazin, the material nature of the image physically being recorded on the emulsion, “supports not only a philosophical agenda that champions the ability of film to reproduce the world, but also reinforces a general – and controversial – supposition that we *can* represent reality” (Willis 2005, 5). I disagree with Bazin’s suppositions of the relationship between film and reality, particularly now, as we have moved away from analog media and into a predominantly digital culture. The inception of postmodernist theory in the 1970s discredits much of Bazin’s faithfulness in realism and the advent of digital photography and manipulation only substantiate the postmodernist cynicism regarding our inability to attain a true reality.

Nonetheless, the technological process that is taking place within digital image capture is fundamentally different from its analog counterpart, primarily because digital video undergoes a process of conversion rather than transcription. “Digital refers to data that exists as a series of discreet elements, arranged in mathematically determined patterns,” of ones and zeros (Willis 2005, 6). Binkley describes how “analogue media store cultural information in the material disposition of concrete objects,” whereas “digital ones store it as formal relationships in abstract cultures” (1993, 96). If analog technologies share a material relationship with the original, as information is transcribed from one mode to another, and digital is nothing more than a pattern on numbers representing abstracted data from its original form, how does this shift actually change the way we produce, distribute and consume images?

One of the biggest advantages of digital technology is in its inherent ease of reproducibility. Unlike analog, digital video can be reproduced time and time again with minimal, if any, loss of quality. Loss of quality in digital reproduction generally takes place when compressing a file. That is, compressing a 720 HD video file into an mp4 will cause a large loss of visual information; however, copying an HD video across similar platforms, renders an exact replicate of the original. Due to the material nature of analog video, deterioration and loss of quality from one copy to the next is one reason that this technology may now be nearly obsolete. “Whereas an analogue signal degrades not only during transmission but with each duplication, digital signals may be altered and reproduced by artists using equipment which rivals the final quality of professional and commercial production” (Willis 2005, 7).

So what does the advent of digital technologies and the shift in the use of analog to digital media have to do with artistic avant-garde practices? My discussion thus far focused on

providing a historical background and definition of the modernist avant-garde movement, as well as defining and contextualizing a major technological shift from analog to digital. While I am not concerned with avant-garde practices as historically defined, I am concerned with the changes in contemporary visual art and how they have been influenced by the proliferation of digital media. Naturally, this brings me to the desire to not only define the concept of the digital avant-garde, but to actually attempt to locate specific communities that fit under the umbrella of contemporary avant-garde art practices. With that said, I now turn to my argument regarding the digital avant-garde.

## The Digital Avant-Garde

The idea of a “digital avant-garde” initially intrigued me upon reading an article by Steve F. Anderson, entitled “Aporias of the Digital Avant-Garde.” In the article, Anderson analyzes different forms of digital media art, such as remixed videos and short films, as a way of exploring the difficulties in properly defining and categorizing digital media art. He begins the article by providing some context to his discussion in relation to the modernist avant-garde:

Whereas the Modernist avant-garde privileged materiality as a means of exploiting the formal potentials of medium specificity, the privileged objects... [i.e. short-form, time-based, digital media] preserve a relation to the material world that grounds them historically. Ultimately, it is not an avant-garde free of contradictions that we seek, but one that illuminates the position of digital media in relation to systems of control – including the rules of representation, technology, and history (Anderson 2007).

Anderson sets out to study specific art objects that he believes have been generally ignored or treated with suspicion by academia. I tend to agree that digital media art in the form of music videos and mash-ups, for example, are not often discussed in an academic setting. Some exceptions might arise in the case of remix culture, particularly if we include Lessig in the discussion, but otherwise, are Humanities scholars really all that interested in discussing short-lived digital media art forms? Perhaps in some circles there is a greater research interest, but I would venture to guess that overall, the idea of the digital avant-garde and its corresponding art practices are anything but over studied.

If a large number of scholars had been paying attention to some of the newer forms of visual art in the digital domain, I would likely not be writing this article. Also, the long list of traditional film theory books and other works that address the modernist avant-garde in one form or another are evidentiary of how academics have long been focused on more concrete forms of art. However, the idea of a “new” avant-garde has been addressed by other scholars, such as Lev Manovich, in a way that uses the MAG as a contextual basis for discussing more contemporary forms of avant-garde art. While Anderson argues that the DAG may be historically tied with MAG in its inherent relationship to culture and politics, Manovich argues how the new avant-garde is a sphere where new media technology serves as an extension, albeit limited, of modernist avant-garde practices.

“What was a radical aesthetic vision in the 1920s had become standard computer technology by the 1990s,” as contemporary artists could easily mimic avant-garde practices of the first half of the century by simply manipulating information on a computer screen (Manovich 2002, 7). For example, Georges Seurat painstakingly developed the form of *pointillism* in post-Impressionist painting, a technique that is now embedded into every digital image. We can manipulate each dot, point or pixel with great ease that an artist such as Seurat could have only dreamed of. I draw part of my definition of the digital avant-garde from Manovich’s assessment of what he calls “new media avant-garde.” Below are two of the main distinctions between the new avant-garde and the modernist avant-garde, as discussed in his article, “Avant-garde as Software” (2002, 8):

1. The old media avant-garde of the 1920s came up with new forms, new ways to represent reality and new ways to see the world. The new media avant-garde is about new ways of accessing and manipulating information. Its techniques are hypermedia, databases, search engines, data mining, image processing, visualization, [and] simulation.
2. The new avant-garde is no longer concerned with seeing or representing the world in new ways but rather with accessing and using previously accumulated media in new ways. In this respect new media is post-media or meta-media, as it uses old media as its primary material.

My definition diverges from Manovich's a bit, particularly the second portion, as I am interested in digital art specifically, not just new media as a whole. Therefore, the digital avant-garde refers to digitally based art practices that have diverged from the modernist avant-garde, and are more concerned with the manipulation of information, rather than its creation, and generally functions outside the confines of mainstream culture and academia without any direct intent of becoming re-contextualized outside of its working domain. But what does this mean? First, digitally based art practices refer to art whose primary mode of creation and consumption is via the use of digital technologies. Second, the concept of manipulation of information is more or less referring to source code. That is, information in the digital realm is stored and retrieved using a mathematical sequence of ones and zeros.

Digital artists have the power to directly control information by simply manipulating the code, and some artists go as far as creating their own source code or software in order to overcome the restrictions of pre-packaged programs. While the aspect of artistic invention in the DAG may directly relate to MAG movements, the DAG is more concerned with the manipulation of source information, precisely because digital has been reduced to code. Third, the digital avant-garde is not necessarily concerned with becoming mainstream. Unlike its modernist counterpart, the DAG seems to be mainly found outside of the academy, as many scholars do not seem to take great interest in much of the art that I believe to be part of this contemporary art movement.

Prior to discussing specific DAG examples and key players, there are three other aspects that I would like to touch upon: time period, location and methodology. For the purposes of this particular study, I chose to confine my research to works created after the year 2000 in the U.S. and England. The true methodology or method of creation associated with the DAG remains to be further explored, as that level of research goes beyond the scope of this short article. Nonetheless, I do have a couple of key figures and examples to discuss, which I believe aptly illustrate my working definition of the DAG. Currently, my object of study is a form of audiovisual performance known as live cinema. Live cinema refers to the "real-time mixing of images and sound for an audience, where the sounds and images no longer exist in a fixed and finished form but evolve as they occur, and the artist's role becomes performative and the audience's role becomes participatory" (Willis 2009, 1).

Thus, live cinema is a fusion of sound, music, images, and sometimes even physical objects or actors that are placed together to form an ephemeral, live action performance. By default, live cinema relies heavily on digital technologies, primarily laptops and various software programs. Beyond my personal fascination with this type of artistic performance, I chose live cinema as a basis of study because I believe it fits in with much of what the DAG encompasses. In fact, the existence of live cinema is one of the reasons I began researching the contradictory idea of the "digital" "avant-garde." In similar ways as presented for the discussion on the MAG definition, below is a breakdown of the main ideas that make up the DAG:

- Works are created using digital technology (e.g. computers, digital cameras, sound mixers).
- Oftentimes works are collaborative in nature.
- There is no direct connection to the material world.
- Works are not part of mainstream art and does not seek to be.
- Concerned with the manipulation and flow of information.
- Commonly, art works are ephemeral.
- Not dependent on the academy or scholars for its existence.
- Varied levels of quality in technology, from amateur to professional.

There are a number of individual artists, as well as artist collectives, who are working within the live cinema arena. One such group, known as klipp av (Swedish for “cut apart”), was made up of two mix artists, Nick Collins and Fredrik Olofsson. Due to klipp av’s lack of online visibility, as well as a non-functional website, I believe they are no longer performing together. Nonetheless, I chose to include them in my discussion, as they wrote an article regarding the technological facets of a live cinema production. Their 2006 article describes the complexities of conducting such a performance, as well as the specific technologies used in creating audiovisual shows (e.g. MIDI controls, SuperCollider, MAX/MSP and VJ software). While they do not directly use the term “live cinema” to describe their work, they do refer to an audiovisual show as a mixture of VJ and DJ culture.

Another live cinema collective is a group of British artists known as The Light Surgeons. The Light Surgeons function similar to a musical band, working collectively onstage to produce an entertaining show; however, the main focus is not on performing live music, but in transforming a “traditional music space into image-rich environments with innumerable projectors and images” (Willis 2005, 71). In turn, the audience is met with an amazing collage of recombined footage and sampled sounds that create an intricate live cinematic performance. One of their notable live cinema pieces, *Super Everything\**, focuses on issues of culture and identity throughout Malaysia. *Super Everything\** incorporates a wide range of documentary footage and an original musical score with an overarching narrative that works to establish the project’s identity. Additionally, the images and sounds are projected onto a large screen overlaid with a multitude of titles that function to alter the aesthetic experience by simulating the internal commands of a 1980s personal computer.

## Conclusion

Live cinema, and art collectives such as klipp av and The Light Surgeons, are but two of many possible objects of study within the digital avant-garde. Other visual art forms include remix videos, short-length experimental films, music videos, art installation practices and interactive video works. Live cinema, like other multimedia artworks, provides for a rich cinematic experience that not only bridges the gap between distinct mediums, but also creates a shift in meaning from one internal text to another. I find that live cinema, as a whole, is deserving of academic critique, but often underrated outside of its own exclusive art niche. There is much room in which to further explore numerous facets of live cinema; hence, why I have chosen to begin researching this particular area of the visual arts.

Throughout this article, I have attempted to shed light on a relatively new contemporary avant-garde art movement, by tracing historical roots of the MAG, as well as the technological shift from analog to digital. There is much more to explore and research in the context of the DAG, but I trust that this generally overlooked area of contemporary art will continue to be discussed by both artists and academics alike. As I have noted throughout, the DAG shares little in common with its modernist counterpart, as it is concerned primarily with the manipulation of information and artistic creation in the digital domain, rather than a politicized reaction against

bourgeois society. It is for this reason that I believe that the DAG is far less pretentious than the MAG.

As I continue my research, I may decide to drop the term “avant-garde” from my definition of peripheral digital art, precisely because it may be simply impossible to sever the rhetorical ties with the idea that most envision when encountered with the term. Nonetheless, I argue that the fusion of the words “digital” and “avant-garde,” however peculiar it may be, provides a specific contextual basis for which to begin our search and understanding of non-mainstream digital art. I certainly have the work cut out for me, but I do hope to continue on an exciting path of discovery, both theoretically and creatively, as this article merely scratches the surface of a vast, and seemingly ignored segment of contemporary digital media art practices.

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