Introduction

During the first century of cinema's existence, text—in the form of titles, credits, intertitles, subtitles, rolling introductions, scenarios, and screenplays—has been nearly as inevitable a part of the commercial film experience as flexible roll film. And particular forms of text—specific ways of presenting titles or credits, specific types of scenarios and forms of dialogue—have been central conventions of each cinema-historical period. Even at the dawn of film history, film was dependent on written text in at least two general ways. First, the "playscript" and the "scenario" have always been central to the process of film production. Indeed, they had developed as forms *before* the advent of motion pictures.[1] Second, visual text, in the form of titles and intertitles, quickly became a standard part of film narrative. As the popular market for cinema developed during the first decades of this century, both kinds of cinematic text became increasingly conventional, and audiences developed expectations about the kinds of scenarios they would see enacted in the movie theater and about the ways in which visual text would function to frame and elaborate these scenarios.

Over the years, the very conventionality of the various cinematic uses of text has inspired a variety of creative responses by filmmakers working within the industry and by independent filmmakers who have critiqued industry conventions. Of course, the attempt to maintain or reinvigorate the commercial cinema audience with new, creative approaches to scenarios and screenplays has been central throughout industry history, but even in the less discussed area of visual text, commercial filmmakers have often been ingenious. As early as 1907, Edwin Porter (in *College Chums*) included a passage during which a young man and woman "discuss" the Other Woman on the phone by means of

1. See Patrick G. Loughney, "In the Beginning Was the Word: Six Pre-Griffith Motion Picture Scenarios," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, 211–219 (London: BFI, 1990).

Man and woman argue in Edwin Porter's *College Chums* (1907). Courtesy Charles Musser.

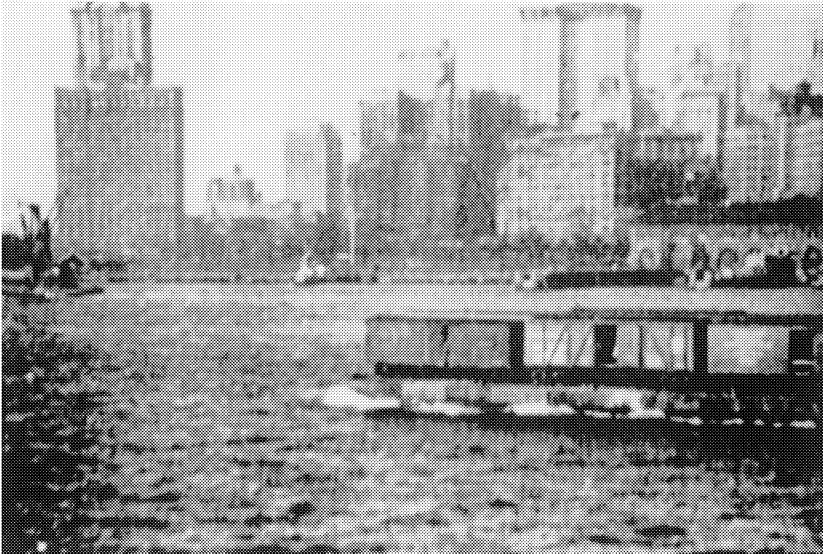
animated words that collide mid-screen when the conversation grows heated. Periodically throughout the teens and twenties, live-action directors (Keaton in *The General* (1926), for example) and animators (Sullivan and Messmer in the Felix the Cat cartoons) explored the potential of printed intertitles and other forms of visual text to energize the experience of silent cinema. Indeed, F. W. Murnau's well-known rebellion against intertitles in *The Last Laugh* (1924)—on the grounds that they were intrinsically unfilmic—was accomplished in part by the use of "more intrinsic" forms of text within the imagery.

Of course, the coming of sound dramatically changed the nature of the texts used in commercial films. Silent acting interspersed with printed intertitles was replaced by extended dialogue. The sound stage became a central focus of industry filmmaking. And the axiom of the industry that films begin with writing was powerfully reconfirmed. Hollywood became famous for trying to lure the most inventive American fiction writers and playwrights to the studios, and a cadre of writers became and remained as inevitable a part of film studios as producers, directors, actors, and cinematographers.

No longer necessary for the development and clarification of narrative, visual text became less important. Sound did make possible the inventive singalong animations of the Fleischer brothers (and others), but in general, visual text became confined to conventionalized titles and credits. In the commercial industry, spoken text has maintained its cinematic priority over visual text throughout the sound era, though there has been some variation in the significance of titles and credits. As the power of the studio system weakened during the fifties and sixties and the TV audience cut into film revenues, directors felt increasingly free to use titles and credit sequences aggressively. Who can forget Saul Bass's credits for *Psycho* (1960)? Indeed, by the mid-sixties, many directors were expanding the visual drama of their opening credits by making them an integral part of introductory sequences.

Text has also been of considerable importance throughout the history of

First poetic text and first image of Manhattan in Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921). Courtesy Jan-Christopher Horak.



those forms of filmmaking which have functioned for makers and audiences as explicit or implicit critiques of commercial moviemaking. In the silent era, independent filmmakers often used visual texts as an element of new forms of film that can be seen as general responses to the growing conventionality of the industry, especially its dependence on narrative and on a limited range of narrative forms. In other instances, visual texts were used to subvert particular expectations created by specific industry conventions.

In 1921 Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand collaborated on *Manhatta*, which intercuts between images of Manhattan and poetic texts reminiscent of Sandburg and Whitman.[2] The goal was not storytelling, but a form of text/image cine-poetry. In *Anemic Cinema* (1926) Marcel Duchamp broke even more fully from industry convention and from the assumption that textual intertitles were a function of narrative development. He intercut between spiral designs that create optical illusions, and spirals of words so dense with puns that they "spiral" in on themselves.[3] For *Un Chien Andalou* ("An Andalusian Dog," 1929), Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali devised texts that confronted specific audience expectations that had developed during the first three decades of film history. The title of the film has no particular connection with any of the action. The film's introductory text, "Once upon a time," leads not to a fairy-tale narrative but to the grisly spectacle of Buñuel slicing a woman's eyeball in extreme close-up (the still-shocking image has often been understood as an attack on conventional ways of cinematic seeing). And the subsequent titles—"Eight Years Later," "Around Three in the Morning," "Sixteen Years Before," and "In the Spring"—have no relationship at all to the activities they appear to introduce, except to elaborate the filmmakers' defiance of conventional narrative means and of the conventional credibility of visual cinematic texts.[4]

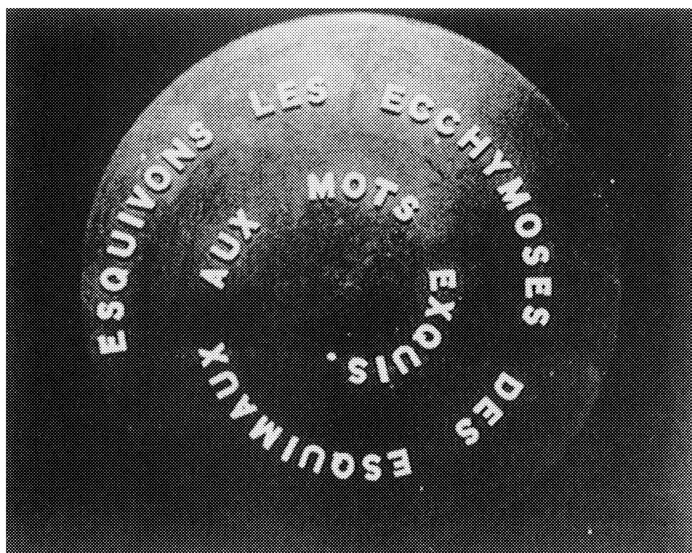
The coming of sound created an expanded rift between the industry and those forms of filmmaking that had, during the twenties, become known as the Avant-Garde. Most independents did not have the financial resources to make synch sound films, and those critiques of the commercial cinema they were able to produce tended to fall back on silent-film methods. The implicit critique of Hollywood moviemaking in the Nykino group's (silent) *Pie in the Sky* (1934), for example, was accomplished in part by clever use of the lyrics of the song "Pie

2. *Manhatta* may be the earliest instance of what in recent years has become known as the "poetry-film." Jan-Christopher Horak discusses *Manhatta* in *Afterimage*, vol. 15, no. 4 (November 1987): 8–15. William C. Wees discusses the poetry-film in "Words and Images in the Poetry-Film," in *Words and Moving Images*, ed. William C. Wees and Michael Dorland, 105–113 (Montreal: Mediatext, 1984). One notable contributor to the "poetry-film," whose work is closely related to *Manhatta* is Rick Hancox, whose *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* (1982) recycles the Wallace Stevens poem, "A Clear Day and No Memories." Other Hancox films include *LANDFALL* (1983) and *Beach Events* (1984).

3. The Duchamp puns are translated and discussed in "Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema*," by Katrina Martin, *Studio International*, no. 189 (January 1975): 53–60; and in "Image and Title in Avant-Garde Cinema," by P. Adams Sitney, *October*, no. 11 (Winter 1979): 97–112.

4. In the film, these texts are in French; I have used the standard translations. Other Avant-Garde filmmakers of the twenties and thirties who used visual text inventively include Man Ray (in *L'Etoile de mer*—"Starfish," 1928), Slavko Vorkapich (in *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra*, 1928), and Len Lye (in *Trade Tattoo*, 1937; and *Musical Poster No. 1*, 1939).

One of the spiral texts from Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926). The words create an almost-nonsense sentence—"Elude the bruises of the eskimos who have exquisite words"—in which the sound (and appearance) of the words play off each other in an amusing way. Courtesy Anthology Film Archives.

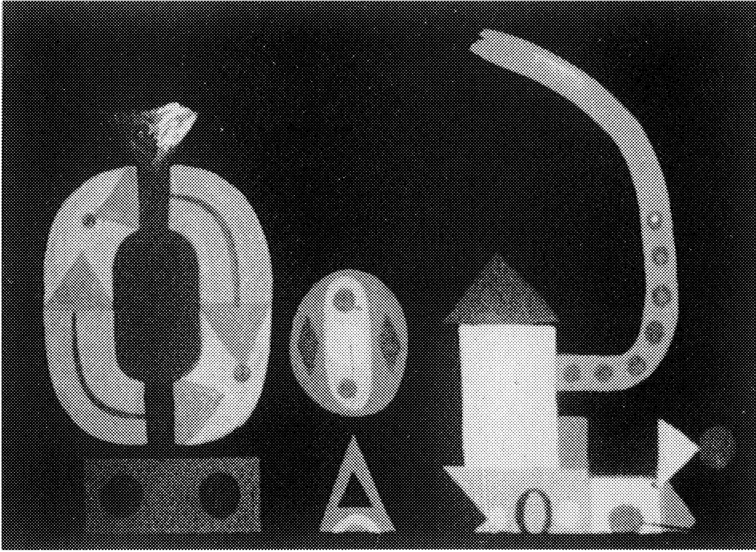


in the Sky" as silent intertitles.[5] By the sixties, what had been an economic limitation had become a "virtue": it was an axiom of many North American independent filmmakers that since synch sound was so central to the materialistic film industry, it should be avoided as aesthetically corrupt, even when economically feasible. When spoken text was part of independent films, in the form of narration or as lyrics of songs, its use tended to critique the conventional assumption that what we see on the screen and the words we hear on the soundtrack should be related in obvious ways that smooth the development of narrative action or, in documentaries, the predictable explorations of the subjects. The soundtracks and the visual imagery of films such as Willard Maas's *Geography of the Body* (1943), Sidney Peterson's *The Lead Shoes* (1949), Bruce Conner's *Cosmic Ray* (1963), and Hollis Frampton's *nostalgia* (1971) are related in complex ways.

Post–World War II independent filmmakers maintained the tradition, begun in the twenties, of using visual texts as elements in a variety of new, unconventional cinematic forms. For *The Big "O"* (c. 1953), animator Carmen D'Avino used a stenciled *O* as the basic figure of an organic painting. In the "Poemfield" series (1966–67) Stan Vanderbeek made computer-generated texts the viewers' central focus. George Landow's *Film in Which There Appear to Be Sprocket Holes, Edge Lettering, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (1966), as the title suggests, foregrounds elements of film's material nature, including edge lettering along the celluloid strip. Bruce Baillie's *Tung* (1966) includes a visual poem as part of his lyrical evocation of the woman Tung. In Paul Sharits's *Word Movie/Fluxfilm* (1967), viewers listen to two speakers alternate

5. Nykino was a film production organization founded by Leo Hurwitz, Irving Lerner, and Ralph Steiner in 1934. See William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), chapters 2 and 3.

O's in Carmen D'Avino's *The Big "O"* (c. 1953). Courtesy Carmen D'Avino.



one-word-at-a-time readings of two distinct texts on the soundtrack, while Sharits presents approximately fifty words, one word per frame, in a graphic arrangement that causes the words to "optically-conceptually fuse into one 3 3/4-minute long word."[6] Joyce Wieland's *Sailboat* and *1933* (1967) use the words "sailboat" and "1933" as central formal elements. And for *White Calligraphy* (1967), Taka Iimura scratched Japanese characters from *The Kojiki*, Japan's oldest story, into the emulsion, frame by frame, so that when the film is projected, the characters are transformed into a graphic dance.

While these and other experiments threw the general predictability of commercial forms into relief, other filmmakers were maintaining the tradition of using visual text to critique particular dimensions of conventional cinema. In Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958), the title "A MOVIE" and the credit line "BY BRUCE CONNER" become central motifs throughout the film, suggesting that *this* film is made by a single filmmaker, not a collaborator who must efface himself in conventional ways. Conner also uses the familiar "10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2" of Academy leader as a central formal element in *Cosmic Ray* (1961), rather than as an (accidental) introduction to the "real film" that follows. Beginning in the late fifties, Stan Brakhage began to scratch his titles directly into the emulsion, one frame at a time, and to sign his films "by Brakhage" in the same way. Brakhage's direct titles and credits were/are as polemical as the films they frame: they demonstrate that his films are the personal, hand-crafted creations of an individual (and individualistic) film artist, not products of corporate conformity. Other filmmakers used intertitles and/or superimposed texts for other kinds of critique. In Marie Menken's *Notebook* (1962) and in

6. This is Sharits's description: *Film Culture*, no. 65–66 (1975): 115. As the title indicates, *Word Movie/Fluxfilm* was part of the *Fluxfilm Program* assembled by George Maciunas in 1966 and available (in part) at the Film-makers' Cooperative in New York. The *Fluxfilm Program* includes other experiments with visual language, including George Brecht's *Entry-Exit* which focuses on the words "entry" and "exit" as, among other things, a movement into and out of the film experience.