# BENEATH NEW YORK: THE FORMATIONS AND EFFECTS OF CANONS IN AMERICAN UNDERGROUND FILM MOVEMENTS

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This dissertation examines the development and transformation of alternative cultural formations by analyzing the relationships between cultural values, affects, practices of everyday life, and canons in such formations. Specifically, it examines two film-centered cultural formations in New York City–the 1960s underground cinema and 1970s No Wave Cinema–by theorizing them as "undergrounds," cultural movements manifesting the structure and organization of subcultures with some of the goals and values of avant-gardism. It describes the ways that these formations developed formal and informal institutions and regimes of value, regimes based in foundational ways on the valorization of affect and everyday life. It analyzes ways in which those institutions and regimes were articulated to alternative and/or oppositional cultural, social, and political values and perspectives, and how they were also articulated to hegemonic values, perspectives, and institutions. These latter articulations emerge clearly in the canonization process, a process that each formation underwent in different ways. The dissertation examines these canonization processes, their relationships with the formations' regimes of value, and their effects on the historical development of the formations. It demonstrates the ways in which canonization, frequently understood as an inherently hegemonic, conservative process, has multiple effects on underground cultural formations, directing tastes and facilitating cooptation while also encouraging continued underground cultural practice and aiding in the introduction of such work, practices, and regimes of value to new audiences. By examining underground cultural formations through the lens of the canon, the dissertation rethinks conventional ideas about the ways hegemonic forces appropriate or incorporate alternative and oppositional cultural movements, rethinking the received historiographies of such movements, the ways in which

conceptions of belonging and mappings of difference are constructed by and for underground formations, and the lessons canonization processes teach us about the role of culture in social and political opposition.

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# Introduction

In 2003, I watched *The Ring*, Gore Verbinski's 2002 Hollywood remake of the 1998 Japanese horror film *Ringu*, on home video with a friend who had a particular investment in experimental cinema (he earned a BFA in filmmaking from Kansas University, working under experimental specialist Edward Small; his favorite filmmaker is Stan Brakhage.) In the film, various characters die in mysterious ways after watching a video that, according to legend, is cursed. A journalist, played by Naomi Watts, investigates the story, eventually finding a copy of the video and watching it. As she watches, the audience watches the tape along with her, experiencing its strange and creepy sounds and images in the real time of the tape's 90 seconds. As I watched the film with my friend, we were both surprised that such a strange piece of filmmaking had made its way into a Hollywood film, and he was able to identify a number of clear precursors to the style of the piece, particularly Surrealist and Dadaist films, but also contemplative experimental documentarians like James Benning and Peter Hutton. At the time, I was very new to and unfamiliar with experimental film, and as my friend explained the origins of various elements of the tape (which include a non-narrative structure, flickering light due to the inconsistent speeds on hand-cracked cameras, associational editing, use of Expressionistic shadows, direct address, abstraction, and other elements commonly associated with experimental film), he grew increasingly disturbed by what he perceived as a commercial cooptation of the experimental film world that he valued so highly. While I found the short piece fascinating and frightening, he dismissed it as a rip-off, claiming that it looked like the work of an undergraduate student who was "trying to be deep," employing obvious, heavy-handed symbolism wrapped up in an "innovative" or "provocative" package.

As I delved more deeply into experimental film, learning more about the films and more about the cultural formations that developed around such alternative/oppositional cultural practices, I began to sympathize with his thinking, recognizing the sources of many of the piece's techniques, and recognizing the ways that it seemed to reduce a complex world of film and video making to a cheap scare, an easy source of edginess that contributed little in the way of aesthetics, thematics, or social or political meaning. As I pieced together the influences on this short work, I began to consider why my friend and I objected so strongly to this use of experimental techniques. Why exactly were we so upset? Why did it matter that they were used simply to creep out a mass audience? Would it have been better, less of a "student film," if different techniques were used, or if it drew from less obvious, less canonical sources? How did experimental cinema, historically a rather marginalized form, even become available for such commercial cooptation? Did this cooptation somehow weaken the force of other experimental work, and did it trivialize the importance of that work and the social and cultural formations from which it emerged? In relying so heavily on established techniques and canonical forebears, did it merely reinstantiate one vision of experimental film, thereby marginalizing and trivializing later work?

And what about other uses of avant-garde techniques in commercial films, such as the video images of a plastic bag floating in the breeze in Sam Mendes's *American Beauty*? These images were cribbed from Nathaniel Dorsky's *Variations* and, in the context of *American Beauty*, they signify something close to how Dorsky might understand them, something like the surprising affects of the mundane, the seductive qualities of everyday beauty. While the use of avant-garde techniques in *The Ring* substantially recontextualizes images, coding them primary in terms of fear and a clunky kind of symbolism, *American Beauty*'s uses of such techniques

perhaps extend their significance within the avant-garde cinema to the commercial cinema, dragging some of the values of the avant-garde formation into the mainstream. Canonical avant-garde work can thus be "coopted" in various ways by the cultural industries (to say nothing of its uses in the academy or the artworld), not all of which are necessarily damaging or problematic to avant-garde cultural formations. That is, thinking cooptation requires thinking histories and uses together—considering what sorts of values drove the original production of the avant-garde works, how the histories of the formations from which they emerged interact with the works themselves, how audience taste practices and the works' affective force inevitably destabilize the works and the value systems that ground them, and how all of these factors intersect in the hegemonic cultural form of the canon, whose authority is often understood as a mechanism of defense against change and in favor of the reproduction of a value system.

This dissertation seeks to understand the role of values, specifically cultural and social values, and the canons produced in relationship to those values, in what might be called the life cycles of underground movements. The use of experimental film characteristics in commercial narrative productions has a long history, and some major films of the "New Hollywood" that began in the late 1960s used some techniques drawn from this alternative cinema world. That is, experimental films have long been "coopted" for what they could offer commercial cinema, stripped of whatever other meanings, force, or value they may have had. The easy answer to why my friend and I were so angry is thus seemingly simple: corporate and cultural cooptation. Experimental film seemed to have been "sold out" as merely another realm to plumb for entertainment and profit, much like other marginal cultural formations (punk rock, for instance, which has long been a major example for scholarly and popular thinking about such cooptation and incorporation), which, once coopted, are reduced to commodity entities in a cultural economy,

robbed of whatever other effects and forces they may enact. Further, Verbinski and his creative team were clearly familiar with established, canonical experimental films when they made this piece, which reduces 100 years of radical filmmaking to a hoary collection of usual suspects, suggesting that experimental cinema was a matter of historical record rather than an ongoing practice.

And yet, experimental film maintains today in various alternative and oppositional forms that remain on the economic and political fringes, with the films, the filmmakers, the values, and the cultural formations that ground them as yet unassimilated to hegemonic economic and political spheres. While the film in *The Ring* may scarcely embody any of the various attributes typically associated with avant-gardism or subcultural practice, many films and videos still do, helping to ground cultural formations and pushing cultural aesthetics and meanings forward as an "advance guard." Though such film and video making has been in part coopted by cultural institutions like museums, galleries, and the university, such cooptation may, at least in some instances, further the cultural, social, and political engagements of such work rather than stifling them. While various forms of "mainstream" cooptation have certainly happened, to argue that cooptation is the final word on explaining the development of experimental film movements' cultural practices misses the range of effects and affects that this work engenders. If cooptation hasn't killed off avant-garde cinema, adequate understanding of the development of such cultural formations clearly requires attention to other factors, including, as mentioned above, histories, affects, tastes, and values, all mediated by the form of the canon.

The dissertation focuses on two moments of a major alternative cultural practice in the United States: avant-garde/experimental cinema. This cinema is, in many ways, rather diverse and diffuse, but it has several moments of fairly tight-knit collective practice, two of which will be

discussed in this dissertation: the 1960s underground cinema movement and the No Wave Cinema movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which itself grew out of the New York punk movement. Both of these undergrounds resemble subcultural formations more commonly discussed in academic literature in a number of ways, including the collective nature of many of their practices; a (sometimes partial) commitment to non-corporate modes of production, exhibition, and distribution; engagement with taboo or *outré* themes; radical stylistic difference from "mainstream" film; a commitment to the local character of their practices; and a commitment to non-hegemonic political, social, and cultural values, coupled with active oppositional practices. However, there are significant differences between them: the underground cinema was a formation of the 1960s, while No Wave was a product of the 1970s, and the political interests of the formations reflected their historical contexts. While both emphasized cinematic production over other media, they were each embedded in larger artistic spheres. Further, each group's take on the history of its own medium is quite different. To some degree, the social and economic backgrounds of the participants in each formation were different, though we shall see that the very diversity of backgrounds of these participants raises questions about the roles of social and cultural values in their life cycles.

Both formations were also centered in New York City. New York was, arguably, the birthplace of each movement, and focusing on one geographic locale facilitates historical comparison more easily than if I were to choose movements from disparate locales. There is a certain historical continuity between the movements—they both stand as moments of a long legacy of subcultural and avant-garde practice in New York stretching back through the Beats, the Bebop jazz musicians, the American Surrealists, and New York-based literary modernists. This is not to argue that the underground cinema somehow spawned No Wave directly, but rather that they developed out of the larger subcultural milieu of New York City.

I argue that canons, in both of these cultural formations, play crucial, but rather different roles, depending on specific aspects of the formations' institutions, regimes of value, and relationships to broader culture. That is, while canons are often celebrated for their ability to give us a cultural center, or derided for their partial and potentially racist, classist, or sexist representations of a culture, they are in fact much more varied in their effects than both champions and critics tend to let on. This is particularly true of canons of small, underground formations such as those I attend to here, as such formations' small sizes and relatively brief historical lives make them particularly susceptible to the effects that a controversial device like a canon might have.

Further, examining these canonization processes and their effects demonstrates the inevitability of canonization of almost any cultural formation and the drawbacks and benefits it can have for such groups. While canons certainly contribute to cooptation, they can also spur new representations, and revisions of those representations, for those who are invested in these formations. The ahistorical tendencies of the canon form may obscure these formations' historical contexts, enabling the effacement of the formations themselves in favor of their decontextualized products, but those tendencies also allow undergrounds to extend beyond their established historical boundaries, giving them ongoing influence and value in future contexts. In other words, canons contribute to, challenge, and *ignore* cooptation, drawing underground formations into dialectical relationships with formations of power. Canons are partial, so they necessarily produce incomplete, even distorted, representations of the formations they canonize. However, this partiality also opens up future spaces for new activity, new culture, and new politics.

Underground canons, then, show us the incompleteness of cooptation by various "mainstream" forces and the limitations of positing cooptation as the historical end to underground formations. Because the values that canons work through are distinct (though not necessarily

entirely divorced) from the economic value that drives much cooptation, they establish representations of cultural formations that cannot be wholly subsumed by economic interests. We will see how economic forces shape underground canons in certain ways, but also how canons themselves, which would seem to be hegemonic tools *par excellence*, can spur resistance to purely economic interests in favor of other forms of value that may present opportunities for larger scale resistance in various spheres.

Beyond this fact, canons show us the incompleteness of cooptation as a concept through which to historicize alternative or oppositional cultural formations. Examining canonical processes and effects allows us to better understand the dynamics of various forms of value in such formations, the ways that affects can make and unmake them, and the ways that tastes, in all their mercurial splendor, both shape and are shaped by cultural authority and social power. Adequate historicization of alternative or oppositional cultural formations cannot treat cooptation as the final word, the death knell of the formation, but must look beyond it into the multitude of relations that these formations have with the hegemonic structures they challenge, and the lives beyond canonization they so frequently live.

Before broaching the theoretical problems with which this dissertation will concern itself, I want to now provide brief accounts of these underground movements. Subsequent chapters will provide more historical detail of these undergrounds' respective developments, but these short synopses should provide adequate detail with which to contextualize the theoretical discussions that follow.

The 1960s Underground Cinema

The underground cinema grew out of several lines of social and cultural influence. While there had long been experimental filmmaking in New York and elsewhere in the U.S. and around the world, its communities were usually small and often isolated from most substantive political and social engagement. However, in the late 1950s, a number of filmmakers and writers began describing their cinema in explicitly oppositional terms. Many of these artists had been regulars at the screenings of the Cinema 16 film society, a club organized by Amos and Marcia Vogel in 1947 to screen a broad variety of films—international narrative films, exploitation films, educational films, documentaries, and avant-garde films. These films, especially the pre-war European and post-war American avant-garde films, were quite influential on this younger generation of filmmakers and writers, particularly Lithuanian immigrant Jonas Mekas, who founded the journal *Film Culture* in 1955. While Mekas was initially reticent to celebrate the experimental films screened at Cinema 16 and elsewhere, by the late 1950s he was the most vocal booster of this kind of cinema, both in *Film Culture* and in his weekly columns in the *Village Voice*. In 1960, following the 1959 watershed screenings of *Shadows* (John Cassavetes) and *Pull My Daisy* (Frank and Leslie), Mekas and a number of others (including Shirley Clarke, Gregory Markopoulos, Robert Frank, and Alfred Leslie) formed the New American Cinema Group, a group dedicated to film production outside the corporate and industrial model of Hollywood. While the group was unable to maintain its coherence and focus due to internal differences, the notion of a cinema operating in explicit opposition to Hollywood both stylistically and economically gained momentum and led to an explosion of this kind of filmmaking in the first half of the 1960s, especially in New York and San Francisco. This explosion was labeled the "underground" cinema, which was somewhat more broad-ranging in terms of style and content than the realism-and-narrative-based New American

Cinema had been. Further, the notion of an underground cinema drew on one of its strongest influences, the beat movement of the 1950s, whose self-imposed marginality and rejection of mainstream values found new homes in the 1960s. Mekas founded the Film-makers' Cooperative in 1962, shortly before the demise of Cinema 16, in an attempt to provide distribution to any filmmaker who wanted it; unlike Cinema 16, there was no selection board to determine if a given film was worthy of distribution or exhibition.

Most of the films of the underground cinema are radically different from Hollywood's films in terms of both style and content. Hand-held cameras, non-naturalistic and non-professional acting, improvisational and impressionistic editing, lighting, and set design all play major roles in the underground cinema. Many of these filmmakers reject the standard editing practices of mainstream commercial cinema in favor of very long takes or very rapid editing. Many of the films are at best loosely grounded in narrative, reflecting the influences of the French *Nouvelle Vague* and other international cinema movements, and some are non-narrative. Some (such as some of Stan Brakhage's films) avoid shooting altogether in favor of painting and scratching on film. Filmmakers typically shot on very low budgets with very short shooting schedules, and the films' off-the-cuff feel contrasts sharply with the carefully planned and executed work characteristic of Hollywood. Films deal with content taboo in commercial cinema, particularly non-normative sexualities and drug use. Further, the films often reflected the lives of the underground participants: a rejection of the mainstream conception of "normal" living in favor of experimentation with sex and drugs, a rejection of working in pursuit of the American Dream, and a focus on community over competition.

As the 1960s wore on, the underground cinema changed significantly. The focus on non-normative lifestyles and improvisational filmmaking faded to the background in favor of a kind of

cinema more closely linked to the problems of avant-garde art as art.[1] This filmmaking, the so-called structural filmmaking movement, concerned itself with the materials of cinema and problems of aesthetics rather than alternative modes of living and representing oneself. The reasons for this transition are many, but it is important to point out here that many have considered structural film to be the natural outgrowth of what has been called the death knell of the 1960s version of experimental filmmaking in New York: the formation of Anthology Film Archives in 1970. In a countermove to the Filmmaker's Cooperative's policy of open distribution, Anthology was established as a site to archive and screen what its selection committee deemed the most important films of the avant-garde and international cinemas. This explicit move toward selection and the resultant canonization are crucial terms for understanding the role cultural and social values play in the development and decay of this underground movement. Such problems of the canon will be the central concern of this dissertation.

## New York No Wave

The No Wave underground, whose participants engaged in cultural practices across a variety of media (most notably music and film, but also painting, literature, performance, and other cultural forms), emerged from the New York punk scene of the mid-1970s. New York punk began among a group of artists, poets, and musicians in downtown Manhattan. Living in a city of repressive social policies, rising housing costs, and a crumbling infrastructure, these artists, poets, and musicians sought a cultural space that could present an alternative, or at least a protest, to the malaise of the 1970s. Populating the Lower East Side (a seedy and crumbling part of town that offered the

[1] Note that this is the standard historical line on the development of the formation across the decade. While structural film did dominate this filmmaking world by the early 1970s, the transition is sometimes somewhat overstated in histories, which may ignore other avant-garde/experimental filmmaking going on in these and other locations during that time.

cheapest possible rent), these people drew on a diverse set of influences to attempt to refigure cultural practices and their roles in the lives of their practitioners, including both avant-garde music and literature and the trashy bubblegum and garage rock of the 1960s. The punk rock scene in New York flourished into the late 1970s at key venues like CBGB and Max's Kansas City, small, run-down clubs that became the major sites for performance and interaction. Its participants celebrated punk for breaking down the musician/artist hierarchy, rejecting the reigning popular music formulas of the time (arena rock and disco), accepting musical amateurishness (a characteristic that came to dominate U.K. punk—many in New York could, in fact, play their instruments with some proficiency), celebrating non-hegemonic social and political values, and for its alternative modes of production and exhibition (another characteristic that gained even more value in other scenes—in fact, many bands on the New York scene were fairly quickly signed to corporate record labels, with Sire [a Warner Bros. subsidiary] chief among them).

However, as New York punk became more visible in the mainstream press and as some of its musicians began to move away from the underground toward major label record deals and more pop-oriented music formats, some bands became canonical names and some disappeared. Around 1978, a counter-punk movement labeled No Wave emerged to challenge what its participants saw as a selling out of punk and underground principles to the highest bidder. Based on extreme dissonance, aggressive stage presence, and desperate living, this movement was short-lived, but its very emergence highlights the dissolution of the initial punk scene as well as the development of a distinct, yet closely related, underground formation.

A crucial component of the No Wave cultural scene, which, like punk, consisted of a wide variety of cultural practices across various media, is the No Wave Cinema, short and feature films by filmmakers such as James Nares, Amos Poe, Beth and Scott B, Vivienne Dick, and Eric

Mitchell, which were often shot on Super-8mm. These films are associated with the No Wave scene not only because their makers, actors, and crew members circulated within that scene, but also because they were typically grounded in an aesthetic akin to that of the music: the films were typically made roughly, quickly, and cheaply, and they feature "un-professional" acting styles, lighting, camerawork, and editing. Further, the films often deal with the gritty details and difficulties of lower class urban living, replete with violence, drug use, and sexuality. Finally, these films often shared the same venues as No Wave bands; since they were not seen as commercially viable in the larger film market, screenings were most common in bars, clubs, alleyways, and apartments. This cinema, influenced as it was by the 1960s underground cinema, helps to demonstrate the continuity between and comparative value of these undergrounds.

Theoretical Import

Drawing these two underground movements together allows me to inquire about the theoretical frameworks with which they are most commonly analyzed: theories of the avant-garde and theories of subculture. While often operating in different spheres—theories of the avant-garde have developed out of art history and literary studies as ways to think about aesthetic difference, while subculture theories have developed out of sociology and cultural studies as ways to understand the politics of sociocultural subgroups—bringing them together allows for significant insight into how these movements develop, change, and dissolve. Approaches via theories of the avant-garde have typically focused on style and movements' relationships to art as art, while subcultural theory considers subcultural style in terms of its social and political meaning, along with the social and political *practices* of these groups. The theories tend to operate on two distinct levels: the former generally works on the levels of aesthetics and institutional context, the latter on

the levels of practice and sociocultural context. Cinema movements like the New York underground cinema have typically been discussed by scholarly critics and theorists as avant-garde movements, with the focus usually being placed on their stylistic characteristics and their relationships to other avant-garde movements and to the institutionalized art world. Punk rock has consistently been analyzed as a subcultural movement, one whose signifying practices are read for social, cultural, and political content rather than for their own aesthetic merits or their relationships to other musical movements, and this analysis has extended to No Wave music as a kind of adjunct to punk. There are exceptions, of course (Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* is the landmark text reading punk as an avant-garde movement, and the last 15 years or so have seen more focus on the sociocultural meanings and practices of the New York underground cinema in such books as David E. James's *Allegories of Cinema* and Juan Suárez's *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars*), but by and large, the more or less elite cultural status of experimental cinema (and its scholars) has led to its treatment as a rarefied, intellectual pursuit, while the generally low cultural status of punk and No Wave have disqualified them from this kind of treatment, generating symptomatic readings of style that ignore the potential aesthetic value of texts, the significance of practices to participants themselves, as well as the complex interplay *between* participants within the subculture. Of course, the elite/low cultural status divide has to a substantial degree broken down by theories in the orbit of postmodernism, but the ways in which scholars have typically dealt with the underground cinema and No Wave scene belie claims of a complete erosion of the divide.

My argument begins with the position that these two theoretical edifices, avant-gardism and subcultural theory, ought to complement rather than exclude each other. The older cultural studies model of subcultures, by leaving out the modes of analysis characteristic of scholars of the avant-garde, often downplays the value of practices and texts for participants themselves, reading them in

a reductive account of symbolic opposition at the expense of all their other uses. The attention to matters of cooptation common in subculture theory tends to downplay the unpredictable dynamics of affects and taste that make possible future subcultural formations, or mutations in existing formations.

Further, the traditional cultural studies approach to subcultures tends to conflate cultural and aesthetic values with social and political ones, effacing any relative autonomy that these different forms of value might have. The approach detailed herein seems more properly in line with the cultural studies project, one that seeks to synthesize analyses at all levels of the social, cultural, political, and economic without reducing these levels to each other. I will detail the basic concepts of each of these theories later in this introduction, but I want to point out here that I will bring these two conceptions of alternative sociocultural movements together under a term which is often used but rarely defined: "underground." Elaborating on possibilities established by Suárez, I want to use "underground" as a label for movements that combine key characteristics of subcultures and avant-gardes. There are, of course, avant-gardes with little subcultural character (the pre-war American film avant-garde, for instance) and subcultures with little avant-garde character (knitting clubs, for instance), but I argue that movements like the 1960s underground and 1970s No Wave Cinemas operate as undergrounds, combining characteristics of each type of movement.

After establishing this theoretical ground, I turn to the movements themselves to understand how the relationships between social and cultural values affect the development of the movements and the possibilities for opposition and resistance so often claimed by undergrounds and those who celebrate them. The most common reason given for the dissolution of underground movements is economic cooptation; scholars and participants alike blame the culture industry for buying up underground movements and repackaging them for mass consumption and exploitation.

Commentators argue that the oppositional possibilities of these movements are watered down and sold as safe rebellion, taking the political and social teeth, as well as the artists themselves, out of the movements and putting them in museums, galleries, record stores, commercial theaters, and television screens. I am not arguing that such a process doesn't occur with underground movements, but putting all the blame on the culture industry for the decline of these movements is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it assumes homogeneity among movement participants themselves. It assumes that they all hold exactly the same social, political, and cultural values, and that without the interference of the culture industries, these participants would continue on in the same direction toward some greater shared goal. This assumed homogeneity ignores differences and hierarchies internal to these movements themselves, differences that play their own important roles in the changes within and dissolutions of such movements.

Further, this common theoretical position towards underground movements sets up a binary division between undergrounds and the mainstream that is too easy and too clear. These commentators ignore the significant interactions between undergrounds and the mainstream on many different levels, assuming an absolute antagonism rather than the continuous negotiations that go on between the two. They rely too strongly on the notion of "resistance" in undergrounds to see where these movements may rely on or prosper from mainstream attention and influence. These relationships are important to a fuller understanding of underground movements, not only because they are extant relationships that are often ignored in simpler theoretical models of subcultures and avant-gardes, but also because they raise the key problem of the real and complex relationships between actual subcultural practice and the sets of social, cultural, and other values that such practices are assumed to be grounded in, typically without adequate evidence.

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