Inventing the Cinema at the Black Maria
by Craig Saper (2003)

Picture the following scene: it is a sunny day in the mid-1890s, say 1894. You've been invited to the Laboratory of Thomas Edison in West Orange to help with an experiment. You arrive and a group of men in one of the brick buildings directs you to a particularly ungainly contraption sheathed in black tarpaper located out in a back lot. It is the Black Maria film studio - the world's first purpose built film studio - with a roof that, lifted up, allows for the sun to brightly illuminate the stage, and the entire building rotates to follow the sun even as it moves during the the day. It looks like no other building you've ever seen. You wonder, in fact, if it is safe to enter. You're happy that the talented Annabelle Whitford, who would perform on numerous filmmaking sessions between 1894 and 1897, will dance before the camera today. If you thought that this event was more than a novelty, if you thought that in a hundred years historians would remember this event as one of the first motion pictures made in America, then you might have written down some notes to serve as documentary evidence: who was there; what roles they played in the production; how the process of shooting the film progressed; what problems the film makers encountered; how the performer related to the unusual circumstances of playing for a camera and crew; and, more. If you wrote your name down as working on this film, you would be remembered as one of the first filmmakers. Historians will later regret that no documentation survives of this event, but you've come here out of curiosity not for posterity.

Whitford's beautiful and sensual dance uses a simple white sheet-like costume to create undulating folds of material that resembles a kinetic Modernist sculpture. These simple movements fill the billowing folds of material flowing from her arms as if they were wings. The small crew tinkers with the camera, loads more film, considers the sun light, rotates the building, and the dance begins again. In this surreal setting mixing invention and an enchanting dance, you find yourself imagining about the future of this novelty, the future of the motion picture machine, the future influence of the Black Maria and Whitford's dance.

My own story and interest in the dance of early and experimental media began when I delivered my first scholarly paper only a few years after the Black Maria Film Festival began twenty years ago. I argued that to appreciate film, one must dance with the films, and most importantly, if scholars put the form and style under glass to study it as an objective empirical object, then one w ill lose sight of an experimental type of spectating. Whether you're a young child trying to figure out a Hollywood film or an adult seeing experimental films for the first time, you need to dance with films or you'll simply leave bemused.

The way I presented the material in my paper created an enormous controversy that still haunts my career. I used a dancing figurine from a toy store that spins when you put a magnetic mirror near the figure (that also has a magnet inside).

As many kids can demonstrate, if you try to put two matching poles of magnets together they move away from each other; and, in this case, make the figurine spin and dance around. I made the ballerina dance around, and then put a bell jar over the figurine. Of course, the magnet had no power to make the figure spin. Similarly, efforts to appreciate the formal and stylistic aspects of film without an experimental frame of mind would not let the film or video or multimedia dance. Some in the audience reacted enthusiastically to my approach, and some, who heard only the second hand reports, reacted with anger and disgust.

The conclusions of my paper, and especially the audience's response would mark my trajectory toward this essay for the Black Maria Film Festival: an essay producing critical work using creative means. That is, audiences can find films and videos as models and inspiration at the the black Maria, not just objects to study. Of course, there is nothing inherently liberating or apt about one model of writing or filmmaking over another as Scott McDonald, one of the preeminent film scholars writing on experimental film, explains in his second monograph (1994) for this festival. The experimental audience and experimenting makers (film, video, multimedia and writing) arrive at the festival open to the alternatives and ready to invent not dismiss.

One might mistakenly think of an opposition between the popular narrative Hollywood cinema and the experimental films in the Black Maria. In fact, the independent direction of the festival initially troubled some sponsors who did not see the connection between Edison's early experiments and later experimental films (Tafler, Black Maria Film Festival monograph, 1993).

In his first Black Maria Festival monograph in 1989, Scott Mcdonald recounts his excitement in figuring out forbidden Hollywood films as a pre-teen, his enthusiasm for great filmmakers after attending a college seminar in the late 1960s, and finally a few years later his initial disgust and outrage with experimental films; they haunted him, and he has subsequently devoted the major portion of his career and his viewing time exploring the experimental cinema. He ends his story by explaining that watching all types of film is an acquired taste. In our childhood we learn how to understand conventional films, and later, if we can return to that child-like thrill, we might also learn to get beyond disgust, anger, and rejection of experimental media: we might learn to dance again.

My life changed dramatically after I delivered that first paper, and to conjure it up as a mnemonic device, a way to remember how to respond to Annabelle and the Black Maria, is as painful as it is fascinating. To remember that figures need to be understood as a dance not under glass is also to remember what is at stake in attempting any experiment.

In his monograph for the 1991 tour of this festival, Richard Herskowitz, now the director of the Virginia Film Festival, talks about his first experiences with

experimental film. The touring schedule of the Black Maria Festival has taken experimental and poetic documentary films and video art to many remote places including western/central New York State, where Herskowitz had his first dances with experimental cinema as a college student in Binghamton. He eloquently summarizes what is at stake for audiences of the Black Maria Film Festival and the lessons he learned in a college class with Ken Jacobs, the experimental filmmaker. They learned to reclaimed films as different as Ed Wood's Plan 9 from Outer Space to films by Oscar Micheaux, a black film pioneer. The lesson he learned was that "experimental viewing meant watching movies from the standpoint of an editor" looking for possibilities. Jacobs' lessons also appear for a wider audience in his film Tom Tom the Piper's Son, "in which the spectator was placed alongside the filmmaker as he re-photographed and re-edited a 1905 silent film," where film audiences can learn to "uncover new narratives, a documentary on the original film and its submerged sexual undercurrents, and rhythmic, purely formal plays of light and shadow. "Experimental films and videos heighten a possibility available to any spectator: they allow us to regard film as "footage" which we might manipulate and recreate. It makes the audiences re-editing and getting ideas for their own work a gateway through which the experimental viewer can "break a film's frame and become critically and playfully reflective on its purposes and potential uses."

In searching for the connections between a festival dedicated to inventive media and Edison's film of a dance, and to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of this festival, all citations in this essay refer to previous Black Maria festival monographs. In the very first monograph published for this festival, Charlie Musser, one of the preeminent Edison film scholars and a faculty member at Yale University, recounts the surprising results of a poll of American independent filmmakers taken in the late 1970s asking who was the most important figure in the history of motion pictures. Instead of choosing the likely suspects of D.W. Griffith, Robert Flaherty, Sergei Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov as the single greatest influence, they chose Thomas Alva Edison. Musser himself was among those filmmakers. And, the name of this festival grows in part from the special place Edison's Black Maria plays in the imaginations of pioneering and experimental filmmakers.

Of course, other historians, like Gordon Hendricks, have noted that Edison's assistant William Laurie Dickson did much of the fundamental work in inventing the motion picture, and Edison ignored this work until he began to realize the potential financial and publicity gains possible with the new technology. Others have even suggested that associates of Edison may have stolen important plans for the film projector from LePrince, who disappeared mysteriously just after completing drawings for a patent of his own.

Although Edison's role as the actual inventor is somewhat controversial, he set in motion the situation that allowed for the beginning of the motion picture industry.

How those early experiments in filmmaking influenced independent filmmakers has become one of the underlying themes of the program notes for this festival.

The actual building of the Black Maria, the first studio "built specifically for making commercial motion pictures," was constructed late in the year of 1892. Although Edison functioned mostly as a hard-nosed entrepreneur who tried, successfully for a few years, to control all the patents necessary to produce motion pictures, that early work in the Black Maria studio still functions as a guide for potential experimental films. By February 1901, one hundred years ago, the Edison Company had replaced the Black Maria with a glass enclosed studio. Edwin Porter, who at the time was tinkering on improving projectors and other equipment for Edison, became the studio head and initiated a fifteen-year move toward the Hollywood style of filmmaking.

Like Musser, Jon Gartenberg, an administrator of the film collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in his 1985 monograph, mentions the identification of contemporary filmmakers with the mythic pioneers. Around 1915, a style emerged that hid edits and produced a continuous narrative flow. On the other hand, in a few years experimental filmmakers presented various non-narrative ways to connect shots and scenes. The Surrealist films, for example, resembled Cubist paintings in an attempt to produce a dream aesthetic where contiguous shots produced haunting connections instead of an invisible spatial continuity. Gartenberg notes that in the early cinema, before the style became standardized in Hollywood and even before distribution and exhibition were standardized with the Nickelodeon, films resembled cartoons, magic lantern slides, and skits. Many competing styles appeared simultaneously. The roots of experimental filmmaking are found in the specific interests of early cinema experiments.

Gartenberg quotes Philip Drummond to conclude that "early cinema offers a number of roads not taken, ambiguities not absorbed into the commercial narrative cinema. But for the avant-garde these need not be seen as history's dead-end streets. They can be inspirations for new understandings of tradition and for new films."

P. Adams Sitney, the influential author on experimental film and a long time member of Princeton University's Film Studies Department, in his 1988 program notes, recalls that at the 1967 International Experimental Film Competition in Belgium Michael Snow's Wavelength, that resembles an early cinema experiment in many ways, won the grand prize and became the critical success of the festival. Sitney notes that "at the same time it was also the occasion of a political demonstration, the first of many during film festivals in the following year, contesting the relevance of showing such films. Far from coinciding with political protest, the avant-garde cinema was a vulnerable object of attack." As the late sixties saw the explosion of a wider experimental culture, and an openness to finding artisanal pre-industrial and independent ways to make and watch films, it

also produced a new concern with reaching wider audiences with larger socio-political issues rather than experiments in style and form alone. More importantly, audiences greeted experimental films with outrage and disgust even at a time considered more open to experimentation.

The first and foremost scholar of documentary film, and a critical influence on the foundation of the Black Maria Film Festival, Eric Barnouw, discusses in his 1992 monograph his interviews with people associated with Dziga Vertov, the highly acclaimed Soviet filmmaker. Barnouw's program note begins by recounting his trip in the early 1970s to the Soviet Union to do original research on Vertov's films and life. Of course, the uniqueness and uncertainty of such a trip during the waning decades of the cold war make his story read like a suspense thriller about research and discovery. At the archive he began looking through Vertov's (Denis Kaufman) films. He discovered some episodes of Kino Pravda previously unavailable outside the Soviet archives. In his investigation of Vertov's life, he began by asking about Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov's main cameraman and the central character in their famous film Man With A Movie Camera.

One confusion Barnouw sought to settle was the identity of Boris Kaufman, who had worked with Jean Vigo on the satirical documentary A Propos de Nice. Some critics confused Boris with Mikhail, and at least one other critic wondered if this was a third brother. Barnouw set out to find the third brother. He met with Mikhail for an interview, and from that interview Barnouw was able to track down the third brother. Boris had fled the Nazis by emigrating to Canada where he worked with John Grierson at the National Film Board of Canada, and later he entered the U.S. where he worked as a cinematographer for On the Waterfront. When Barnouw finally finds Boris living on 9th Street in New York City, he learns that the brothers had corresponded non-stop for fifty years, and, as Boris explained, "Mikhail taught me cinematography by mail."

Because of the real and lasting fears of the Cold War, Boris was less than forthcoming at the interview and later refused to participate or even allow a MOMA retrospective of all three Kaufman brothers' films.

Denis Kaufman chose the name Dziga Vertov because it was the onomatopoeia for the sound of a spinning top perhaps symbolizing a spinning film reel, the spinning of industrial machines, and the political revolution that might grow from those two more concrete images of spinning. Barnouw's "Cold War Story," illustrates how spinning (dancing) always has political impact and risks involved.

Patricia Zimmermann, the activist feminist film scholar in the important film program at Ithaca College, wrote a manifesto for the 1998 festival describing how media conglomerates now increasingly control the aesthetics or look of all media thus making experimental forms inherently political and forums like this festival crucial. She celebrates a "space for an unofficial, samizdat culture of hope," and recognizes this festival as a model. Like many others who have written the

program notes for the festival, including mine, she connects the world situation to a personal recollection of discovering her "thirst for a long, intoxicating drink of new work which I couldn't see otherwise."

Connecting experimental film to the early cinema, Zimmerman casts John Columbus, the impresario of the festival, as being like a 19th century magic lantern showman "who travels from town to town delighting the bored, starved populace" with "a trunkful of films and videos." he brings with him "one of the only festivals in the world that travels to its audience." By traveling to its audience, the festival resembles and re-invents the most important social innovation of the early motion picture industry: the films traveled in a circuit to the audiences rather than audiences having to go to central locations to see films. In the allegory here, we need to recognize the festival's films and videos not as monologues or pictures but as invitation to invent.

Few people even know that the mini-me type studios of New Line, Miramax, or DreamWorks do not produce independent experimental films. As a corollary, the films in the Black Maria Film Festival usually do not appear on mass culture's radar because some ways of making films are so financially dominant in the States. Or, as Patricia Zimmerman notes the "Black Maria's offerings differ in significantly powerful ways from the independent narrative features screened at the Sundance Film Festival, which seem to me to have simply replaced the old B picture system in Hollywood. I can't discern the difference between an indy film at Sundance and a Hollywood studio film once the elaborate sound mixes and special effects are stripped away." Likewise, experimental media studies usually flies under the radar, and, when it does appear in the imaginations of academics, it is sometimes perceived as a disgrace or a willful provocation rather than as an experiment. Watching the variety of films and videos at the Black Maria might help audiences to begin to see the experimental as one more possibility rather than an affront to our conceptions of what a film, video, or essay should look like. The experimental is not the enemy of the serious, popular, powerful, or combinations of all of these.

One can almost imagine the figurative dance of critics and audiences, Windsor McKay style, in front of the Black Maria Festival's projections. What the next 20 years of the Festival hold for the future of film and video art depends in large part on the magnetic attractiveness of that dance.

In discussing the enormous influence of The Velvet Underground, music critics often explain that less than ten thousand people actually saw the band play, but all ten thousand started their own bands. The Black Maria Film Festival's impact may have less to do with the films and videos it projects, less to do with its crucial importance as a forum for filmmakers, than with its influence on the future work of its audiences. To appreciate this festival's history, you will need to put on your dancing shoes. In preparation, here are your instructions if you choose to accept them: pick a film or video tonight that grabs you, provokes you, seduces you in

ways unimagined before. Consider your own personal visceral connection and plot you own figurative dance in response. As the film or video proceeds imagine yourself as Annabelle inventing the cinema. How will you invent the cinema? Start dancing.

Craig Saper has published numerous articles and chapters on film and art including an essay in "Directed" by Alan Smithee (2001). He is the author of "Artificial Mythologies: A Guide to Cultural Invention" (1997) and "Networked Art" (2001) and recently guest edited an issue of "Style" on interactive style. Mr. Saper currently teaches at The University of the Arts. More of his writing about Edison appears in "Spinography: From Tom Edison's Lightbulb to Walter Benjamin's Alarm Clock" in "Strategies", vol. 12, no. 1 (1999).