CONCLUSION

Much of the discussion in this book has revolved around illustrating how experimental filmmakers have a legacy of making intuitions about the mind, and finding aesthetic interest in uncharted places. Maya Deren intuitively understood that an artist can cue narrative expectations for the purpose of generating allegorical inferences without providing full narrative coherence, and this can be compelling in a different way to a well-told tale. Hollis Frampton understood that information can be ordered sequentially instead of narratively for aesthetic purposes, and Peter Hutton understood that viewers can be engaged by his films while operating at an uncommonly low level of arousal. Stan Brakhage understood that imagery that attempts to reintroduce the corporeality of the eye to the cinematic image by approximating entoptic vision and phosphenes can be compelling. Robert Breer recognized that creatively negotiating the threshold between the perception of still imagery and cinematic motion can also be engaging. Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye understood the power and appeal of synaesthetic correspondence and synchronization as techniques to engage aesthetic interest.

These practices characterize a widely dispersed range of experimental filmmakers as practical psychologists who provide mental activities that are not experienced in other cinematic domains. They also, using 'sense as muse' (in Stan Brakhage's words), draw creative inspiration by attending to their own observations about the mind. These intuitions, this book has demonstrated, often converge with research conducted by psychologists in a formalized setting. It is not the artist's job to understand the underpinning mechanisms of the mind; this may even be creatively stifling. Rather, their principal aim is to create aesthetic impact in some form or another, while the psychologist more dispassionately studies psychological mechanisms in order to understand how they operate. Unlike commercial filmmakers, experimental filmmakers do not need to be concerned with the commercial appeal of their work. Rather, their own creative curiosities may be indulged and they may find paths to aesthetic engagement in unexpected places.
Defining Avant-Garde Film (Revisited)

In the introductory chapter, various characteristics of avant-garde film were detailed. This topic will now be revisited and expanded on, in light of themes explored during the course of this book. It will not be outlined as a series of essential characteristics, but rather a series of tendencies that pertain to the avant-garde. First, the context of distribution and production may be considered:

• Operating in an artisanal mode rather than an industrial mode, the filmmaker will fulfill several roles that are typically assigned to separate people in mainstream film production. It may be created by a single person or a small collective.
• The film will be self-financed or funded by a small grant from an arts institution, without expectation to make a profit.
• Instead of undergoing commercial distribution, avant-garde films are normally distributed independently or through film co-operatives to be exhibited by film societies, universities and museums.

The aesthetics of avant-garde films may be characterized thus:

• Avant-garde films evoke more than they tell. They do not offer a clear, univalent ‘message’.
• The film may possess an oppositional relationship to both the stylistic characteristics and value systems of mass media.
• The materials of cinema may be consciously employed in a way that calls attention to the medium.
• Surface detail typically plays a larger role in the experience of the film than the semantic details.

The respective roles of the artist and spectator may also be commented on:

• The artist will draw principally from their non-rational intuitions when creating the film. They may try to express ideas or feelings that are, in a sense, inexpressible.
• The creative process may put a greater emphasis on the process of discovery than a commercial film, which tends to be pre-planned in more detail before filming begins.
• The spectator might not understand shot-for-shot what the film means, but they cede to the artist’s authority, like a guiding light of intent. This becomes part of the experience of the film.

One may comment that avant-garde films do not generally tell traditional stories or conventional narratives. However, this can be explained in more detail:
• The film will not typically be motivated by a disruption and subsequent reinstatement of equilibrium. There will be no clearly defined goal that motivates the onscreen events.
• If agents feature, they may be psychologically opaque with unclear motivations, intentions and thoughts.
• A chain of events may feature, but will not necessarily be linked according to dramatic consequence. They might instead be connected thematically, or according to graphic interest. This makes any chain of events sequential rather than consequential.
• Shot-to-shot relations do not necessarily mark a linear passage of time. Temporal relations between shots may be undefined or immaterial.

Finally, there are also cognitive and perceptual dimensions, which are typical of avant-garde film:

• The mind is exercised in ways that will be unfamiliar in other aesthetic contexts.
• Artists may draw inspiration from their own cognitive and perceptual capacities instead of generating dramatic scenarios.
• The way a film is rendered in the mind may be as important a part of the aesthetic experience as the contents of the film itself. For example, the way it is compressed or embellished as a memory, or the hallucinations generated through flickering imagery.
• The spectator’s ability to psychologically elaborate on the events depicted may be more restricted than traditional narrative-dramatic films.

With a clearer definition of experimental film in place that draws together a range of themes explored in this book, the implications of exercising the mind in unique ways when engaging with experimental film will now be considered.

**Expansionism and the Artist-as-Prophet**

Experimental filmmaker Ken Jacobs has characterized art as a tool that fosters mental development, rather than as a medium intended solely to entertain. He comments:

I basically think that the mind is not complete yet, that we are working on creating the mind. And the highest function of art for me is its contribution to the making of mind.¹

The image of the artist-as-prophet who enlightens the spectator, creating work that elevates and instructs its viewers, pleasing while edifying them, dates back
to late eighteenth-century Romanticism (Ferber 2010: 32) – further substantiating P. Adams Sitney’s assertion that American avant-garde film is stationed in Romanticism. While Jacobs’ claim is intuitive and somewhat mystical, it chimes with recent cognitive discussions of aesthetics. In ‘Empathy, Expansionism and the Extended Mind’, Murray Smith divides the mind-building nature of art into two separate components. First, there is extension, in which art is made and understood with the use of commonplace cognitive capacities – engagement skills are applied with little effort that reinforce our native capacities developed to navigate the natural environment. Secondly, there is expansion, in which art stretches our mental capacities, extending them in new directions by calling on unfamiliar processes that are not encountered outside artistic contexts (Smith 2011: 111).

The claim being pitched in relation to expansionism, then, is that expansive aesthetic experiences enhance our ability to notice a wide range of details when engaging with art, and life more generally. This does not mean that our perceptual architecture or physiological hardware is restructured; rather, it means that our perceptual systems become more sensitive and fine-tuned – in much the same way that athletes fine-tune their motor skills when they are training. After viewing a film by Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer or Ken Jacobs (all of whom provide unique perceptual experiences), our hardware remains unchanged, so to speak, yet some of us discover that we have expanded our range of possible routes to aesthetic interest by paying attention to our perceptions in a way that we had not before. Our software (to make a somewhat inadequate analogy) has developed, but the hardware remains the same. Expansion does not necessarily refer to effortful or demanding experiences in art; it can also refer to experiences that are unfamiliar in terms of the way our senses are typically triggered.

Narrative-dramatic cinema can be understood as extensive in the sense that it allows spectators to exercise everyday faculties like narrative comprehension, inference making, engagement with other people, and affective responses. In the artificially constructed environment of commercial cinema, these skills are called upon in a sustained and intensified way – leading to an extensive experience. Smith explains:

> We are all limited, to a greater or lesser extent, in the opportunities we have to engage with situations, persons, and cultures different to a greater or lesser extent from our own. For those who want to take it up, fiction – and, once again, public narration more generally – affords a limitless horizon of opportunities for such engagement. (Smith 2011: 111)

Empathy, then, is a psychological mechanism developed for real-world interactions, which is also exploited and rehearsed in narrative-dramatic film. We engage with characters in scenarios we would not have the opportunity to in real life, and so our empathetic skills are ‘extended’. The extension of empathy is less of a feature within the avant-garde, however.
When defining expansionism, possible interpretations of its meaning should be locked off so that the term does not become excessively broad. ‘Expansion’ could be interpreted as simply meaning ‘learning a skill’ or ‘developing a new habit of engagement’. If this were the case, becoming familiar with cinema itself would be an expansive activity, since most of its aesthetic characteristics bear no equivalent in the natural world: learning to comprehend editing patterns, understanding when an ellipsis in time occurs, recognizing when a shift in the viewer’s point of view takes place, and identifying non-diegetic sound are all unfamiliar in the natural world. In turn, learning to adjust to their conventional use in narrative-dramatic cinema requires developing new skills of engagement. While this might be considered a form of expansionism, the difference between this and adapting to the viewing habits of many avant-garde films is that one needs very little specialist knowledge in order to comprehend traditional narrative films, since they are designed to interface with existing habits of mind. Even with their shifting points of view, temporal ellipses and complex narrative patterning, they are tailored to be understood as effortlessly as possible.

Beyond the basic groundwork of adapting to cinematic conventions, developing an appreciation for unfamiliar movie genres also requires developing a new set of viewing habits – appreciating silent cinema or horror movies, for example, will require an adaptation of aesthetic expectations for an unacclimated viewer so that they might engage with the work as it is intended to be appreciated. Outside the realm of art, learning to drive a car or learning to play chess for the first time all require developing new abilities. Again, however, all of these activities are tailored to ergonomically fit with existing human comprehension skills. What makes avant-garde films ‘expansive’ in the sense defined here, is the way that specialist priming is required to engage with this work, since it does not key in with pre-existing habits of mind. Engaging in a meaningful way with some avant-garde films might not always be possible without specialized knowledge and effort.

In addition to this, avant-garde films may also be notably expansive in the sense that spectators sometimes need to suppress capacities elicited by traditional cinematic engagement that is not narrowly related to a specialised domain, such as narrative comprehension or engaging emotionally with onscreen characters. This is a departure from the received wisdom that viewers who are unreceptive to avant-garde film lack specialist knowledge. It may also be true that they have excess knowledge about film engagement, employed so effortlessly and unconsciously in more conventional films that it becomes difficult to suppress. This may seem like a paradox, but the suppression of habitual skills of engagement may be necessary in order to allow other skills to come forward and be the target of expansion. A viewer may, for instance, need to subdue the commonplace habit of seeking semantic salience in their visual field so that they might pay closer attention to the onscreen graphic details. The viewer may also need to suppress
narrative expectations so that they can focus on generating creative allegorical interpretations, infer obscure metaphors, or concentrate on the ‘mood’ without requiring narrative coherence (discussed in chapter two).

While the contrast so far has been between popular cinema and the avant-garde as opposing poles, there is a continuum between mainstream films and the avant-garde that features puzzle films (see Buckland 2008) and art-house cinema – from Carl Dreyer’s relatively linear storytelling, to Luis Buñuel and Alejandro Jodorowsky’s more challenging surrealist films. Each filmmaker offers varying degrees of challenges to the spectator’s habits of engagement. The closer a film is on the continuum to mainstream narrative-dramatic filmmaking, the more viewers can draw from evolved habits of mind designed to navigate the natural environment, and the generic pool of knowledge that has been instilled from the myriad of other films that they have seen. These are sometimes called extrinsic norms – bodies of conventions and knowledge developed across the history of cinema. Intrinsic norms are conventions developed across a body of work by a single director, or a single film (see Bordwell 1985: 151). Avant-garde filmmakers are less prone to calling upon extrinsic norms, and are more likely to call upon their own set of intrinsic norms (although avant-garde artists certainly imitate one another, and techniques such as scratching directly onto film can become conventionalized). Those interested in avant-garde film may possess a wider array of methods for engaging with work, even though they operate with the same underlying perceptual faculties as those who watch mainstream films exclusively.

It has been proposed, then, that expansive aesthetic experiences may enhance our ability to notice a wide range of details when engaging with art, and life more generally. If avant-garde film does have such an effect on the viewer, some speculative comments can be made about the ways in which expansionism cashes itself out. At the broadest level, the willingness to attempt to understand esoteric films on their own terms may make the spectator more visually perceptive, or capable of finding aesthetic interest in the natural world that would otherwise be ignored. In the case of learning to appreciate the work of Peter Hutton or Nathaniel Dorsky, for instance, one might become more patient and notice hitherto unnoticed beauty in the natural world. Closer attention may be paid to the play of light on a pond ripple, the subtle articulations of leaves trembling in the wind, or the impression of shadows cast on the ground. This is particularly the case if the subject learns to attend to their visual surroundings without being as concerned with its semantic relevance.

In addition to these visual sensitivities, avant-garde films may strengthen a person’s skill at generating creative inferences or synthesizing seemingly dissociated concepts, since generating thematic readings of avant-garde films often requires an act of imagination on the part of the viewer. The creation and consumption of such concepts might also be part of a larger process in which a per-
son defines themselves in opposition to broad societal values. In the post-World War II era of experimental filmmakers, social conventions were frequently bucked. Throughout this period, there was a keen interest in esoteric religion and mysticism (Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, Jordan Belson), resistance to social norms (Jack Smith, James Broughton, Bruce Baillie) and an opposition to conservative politics (Ken Jacobs, Saul Levine). All of these sensitivities and traits can also come about due to personal characteristics and environmental factors, of course. An appreciation of the avant-garde is not a necessary condition for such creative or oppositional thinking, but such an appreciation may help cultivate these qualities further, and they may feed into one another in a cyclical process.

Instead of suggesting that exploring the avant-garde changes a person’s nature more broadly, a more modest proposal would be that the expansive nature of avant-garde art does not necessarily stretch beyond the confines of aesthetic experience – it may only expand our skills developed for engaging with art. This should not be understood as a degradation of its effects, however. Expanding our range of aesthetic interests can be understood as a valuable undertaking in its own right, and the appreciation of an ever-widening range of possible aesthetic experiences does not need to stretch outside the realm of art in order to be meaningful or enriching.

**The Poetic and Structuralist Artist**

In addition to the issues explored in this book, there are more ways in which there is a tendency for experimental filmmakers to be understood as practical psychologists. The remainder of this conclusion, then, will outline two further discussions that this book points towards.

Most of this book has addressed the activity of the spectator rather than the artists themselves. While it may be difficult to reach any definite conclusions on the riddle of creativity and the emergence of personal style, an exploration of this topic within a cognitive framework (see Gardner 1984; Sternberg 1998; Sawyer 2012) may prove illuminating. James Peterson’s definition of ‘poetic film’ dictates that it is to be understood as a product of staunch individualism, and he offers one method of engaging with this work as the ‘style-as-consciousness heuristic’, in which we are to interpret overt manipulations of film style (particularly camerawork and editing) as evidence of the filmmaker’s response to what is shown in the images (Peterson 1994: 40). In a similar spirit, Georges Buffon famously claimed in the mid eighteenth century that ‘style is the man himself’ (Buffon, quoted in Roger 1997: 432).

At the end of their careers, many auteurs, poetic filmmakers and people engaged in other art forms leave behind a creative legacy in which the emergence of their personal style can be charted from their formative works to the stage
when their own ‘voice’ is more fully realized. An artist typically produces a pro-
lific body of work, sees what tendencies arise that are appealing and unique to
them, and then hones in on those details in future work. A painter stakes out
their own territory in painting, a comedian develops a unique mode of address
that strikes audiences as funny, and an experimental filmmaker develops their
own distinctive style. Once an artist finds their voice, they explore the creative
potential within it – the internal logic of their editing style, their camera tech-
nique, their particular choices of subject matter and the manner in which they
are engaged. An internally consistent working method begins to ‘ring true’ for
the artist as they produce their work, and the more fully realized that voice is, the
more difficult it is for others to emulate. Sitney comments on this personal mode
of filmmaking:

the Romantic film-maker looks on the cinema as an instrument of self-discovery or
mythopoeic discovery; the process of making a film becomes a quest for the film’s
often problematic content. (Sitney 2002: 136)

This trial-and-error process of finding one’s voice took a different form amongst
the structural filmmakers, however. Structural filmmakers seemingly reversed
this staunch individualism by minimizing or eschewing personal aesthetic
choices, in a manner comparable to John Cage’s chance music, or serial mu-
sic. While Brakhage’s style revealed itself organically over time, Warhol (as an
heir to Cage in some senses) approached film more like a conceptual artist. His
film Sleep (1963), for instance, was not informed by years of experience as a
filmmaker. Rather, he had already cultivated a sensibility that allowed him to
approach filmmaking from a novel perspective. Personal style still reveals itself
for the structural filmmaker, but not through the same path that a poetic film-
maker takes.

‘Style’ in structural film (at least in terms of editing and camerawork) is largely
impersonal. The camera is often static, and the editing is mechanically rhyth-
mical – consider, for example, the shot-per-second editing of Frampton’s Zorns
Lemma, and the regularly intervaled editing patterns of Critical Mass (1971) and
Ernie Gehr’s Serene Velocity (1970). Brakhage or Bruce Baillie’s editing styles,
by contrast, have a syncopation to them that gives their work a tactile, human
quality. In Eyes Upside Down, P. Adams Sitney plays the structural and poetic
creative dichotomy off one another by way of quoting John Cage and Stan Bra-
hage. Cage claims that he is devoted to the principle of originality, but ‘not
originality in the egoistic sense’ (Cage, quoted in Kostelanetz 2003: 221). Bra-
hage, by contrast, was not deterred by what Cage referred to as egoism, com-
menting ‘OF NECESSITY I BECOME INSTRUMENT FOR THE PASSAGE
OF INNER VISION THRU ALL MY SENSIBILITIES, INTO ITS EXTERNAL
FORM’ (Brakhage, quoted in Sitney 2008b: 7, capitals in original).
The concept of the filmmaker as a practical psychologist, then, could be productively elaborated on by addressing the question of artistic creativity from a cognitive framework. Within this, the intensely personal style of the poetic filmmakers could be contrasted with the radically impersonal work of the structuralist filmmakers.

The Dreamers

Another aspect of the human mind that has provided creative inspiration for experimental filmmakers is dreaming. Sleeping and awakening occurs across Kenneth Anger’s Magick Lantern Cycle, for instance; the events from Fireworks (1947) begin with the central character (known as The Dreamer, played by Anger himself) waking from his dream, only to enter another one (Figure 7.1). Lord Shiva (Samson de Brier) commences Inauguration of the Pleasuredome (1954) by awakening in his chamber. Rabbit’s Moon (1950/71) opens with Pierrot (André Soubeyran) reclining on the ground as though he has just been roused by the moonlight, and Yvonne Maquis slumbers in Puce Moment (1949) (Figure 7.2). In Lucifer Rising, we are introduced to the Adept (Haydn Couts) when he awakens, suggesting that the preceding events may have been his dream (Figure 7.3). Lilith (Marianne Faithfull) also first appears awakening inside a stone sarcophagus (Figure 7.4).

Anger’s recurrent references to sleep and dream states place him in line with the tradition of artists who formed the basis of non-linear storytelling, entering
the realm of the associative rather than causally connected waking logic. Riding on the wave of surrealism and psychoanalysis, avant-garde films had a running affiliation with dream consciousness – from *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) through to *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (1947), Jean Cocteau’s *Orpheus* (1949), Bruce Conner’s *Valse Triste* (1979), and Peter Tscherkassky’s *Dream Work* (2001). As discussed in chapter one, P. Adams Sitney coined the term ‘psychodrama’ as a strand of avant-garde film, pioneered by Maya Deren and explored further by works such as Anger’s *Fireworks*, James Broughton’s *The Potted Psalm* (1946) and Brakhage’s *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954). Al Rees comments that the psychodrama was in part modelled on dream, alongside lyric verse and contemporary dance (Rees 2011: 58).

Indicative of the pervasiveness of dream states in avant-garde filmmaking around the mid twentieth century, in 1960 Parker Tyler published an essay entitled ‘Dream Structure: The Basis of Experimental Film’ in which he offered a strategy for engaging with experimental films by suggesting they should be considered analogous to dreams and hallucinations. But the pairing of avant-garde film and dream states seemed to be losing momentum as the decade progressed. Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963) can be interpreted as a parody of dream films, consisting of a long take of a man sleeping for 5 hours and 20 minutes, showing the process of sleep from the ‘opposite side’, so to speak.

The inspiration of dream states leads further back than surrealism, however. Sitney sought a unified view of American avant-garde film by tracing it to the tradition of nineteenth-century Romantic poetics (Sitney 2002: xiii). This was an artistic and intellectual tradition originating in the late eighteenth century that formed, in part, as a reaction against prevailing Enlightenment ideas of the time, such as a respect for scientific method and rationalism. Romantic poetics, like avant-garde filmmakers, also held a fascination with dream states.² Allan Hobson, the psychologist and dream researcher, argues that the interest in dreams stretches back further still and not exclusively within the arts:

Dreaming has fascinated humankind since the dawn of recorded history. As dreaming is so vivid, so complex and so emotional, it has inspired religious movements, artistic representations and introspective scientific theories. All of these premodern expressions have been based on the idea that dreams contain messages that cannot be delivered in any other way. Thus, it was thought by early Judaeo-Christians that God communicated his intentions via certain prophets to his human subjects. […] Early Western Artists, such as Giotto, used dreaming as a vehicle for the pictorial representation of prophetic inspiration. Sleeping saints and churchmen are shown in the same pictorial frame as the visions that their dreams inspired (Hobson 2005: 1).

More recent theories of dream moved away from the spiritual but continued to assume that they possess a crucial psychological purpose. To Sigmund Freud,
dreaming provides a playground for the unconscious mind (Kalat 2007: 538). To Carl Jung, it is a stage where the psyche's archetypes act out primal themes. A more recent theory as posited by Allan Hobson is that the brain is simply 'warming its circuits', anticipating the sights, sounds and emotions of the coming day.

When Hobson describes the character of dreaming, it shares several characteristics with avant-garde films. Some of the cardinal features of dreaming, according to Hobson, include 'loss of awareness of self (self-reflective awareness); loss of orientational stability; loss of directed thought; reduction in logical reasoning; and, last but not least, poor memory both within and after the dream' (Hobson 2005: 5). He also comments that while dreaming, thought is illogical, sensation and perception are almost entirely internally generated, volition is weak and attention is difficult to direct (ibid.: 128). Some of these aspects of dream consciousness are typical of film spectatorship in general, while others are particularly common in the experience of avant-garde film, such as loss of directed thought, loss of orientational stability and impaired memory (see chapter two).

In his article ‘Some Things that Narratives Tell Us about the Human Mind’, Wallace Chafe comments on the nature of narrative to the dreaming mind, unmediated by the outside world:

> the mind can go on creating representations of the world even in the absence of 'real' sensory input; constructing, as it were, its own input, as in dreams. Dreams may be the strongest evidence we have that the mind goes on busily constructing its own representations, regardless of what may be coming in from the outside. The main thing that dreams lack is coherence. When left to its own devices, the mind creates a kaleidoscope of loosely strung together experiences. Sensory input during our waking hours may force these experiences to hang together in terms of spatio-temporal consistencies that are present in, and imposed by, the outside world itself. (Chafe 1990: 80)

In other words, when in a dream state, the mind does not generate spatially and temporally consistent narratives. Rather, the outside world 'keeps it in check'. The filmmaker and the spectator, just like the characters in many avant-garde films, are like dreamers in a certain respect. Further reflection on this subject may prove illuminating.

**Conclusion**

Although the history of art can be understood as a series of changes and evolutions, the avant-garde is a more recent and distinct development. From one movement to the next through the history of the arts, aesthetic conventions build on each other and change over time. In a sense, there has always been an
advance guard, artists who continually sought to push their creative forms in new directions while working in the context of previous generations. Gregorian chants led to Baroque, Classical and Romantic music. By the same token, Byzantine art led to Renaissance, Romantic and Impressionist art. Changes and developments in the history of art and aesthetic experience, then, is nothing new. Those artists who pushed existing forms to the next movement, however, were not avant-garde in the specific, historical sense of that term, which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In charting new modes of seeing, perceiving and thinking, experimental film-makers attempt to capture that which cannot be fully expressed. Stan Brakhage comments:

artists are always going to stray into the realm of the inexpressible because really that's their work, . . . to try to push through those boundaries, the same as astronauts do through space, those boundaries of the known kinds of thinking and communicating in the mind. (Brakhage 1982a: 23)

Modernism itself and the avant-garde can be understood as a significant development in the history of art, even if it is only appreciated by a niche audience. While it has provided norms and conventions that have been subsumed into mainstream culture (such as abstract paintings mounted in restaurants and office spaces), this book aims to have illustrated how in some respects it has also provided experiences that stress and stretch our cognitive and perceptual habits in ways that are uniquely challenging and cannot be incorporated into the commercial landscape. The avant-garde led to a sub-community of filmmakers, some of whom have drawn inspiration from their own psychological capacities, who provide unchartered cognitive and perceptual experiences that are unrehearsed in life and commercial art, and invite spectators to reflect on their own mental facilities. In turn, we have been graced with a diverse range of sounds and visions that enrich and delight those who are sensitive to their charms.

Notes

2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the poet, philosopher and co-founder of Romanticism is discussed in Jennifer Ford’s Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination (2005).