



Book review

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Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894–1941. Image Entertainment; Box set of seven DVDs (2005). Curated by Bruce Posner; produced by David Shepard.

Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893–1941. Produced by Cineric for Anthology Film Archives; 160 pages (2001). Edited and annotated by Bruce Posner. Available at www.unseen-cinema.com.

Sometimes film history really is revisionist

Unseen Cinema, both the DVD set and the catalogue of the touring exhibition which inspired it, are significant pendulum swings, exasperated correctives to the general line imposed on the history of American avant-garde (or experimental, or 'amateur') cinema since at least the 1960s.

The target is not the usual laziness or lethargy that still marks much film historiography, but a specific, institutional orthodoxy. Although it goes unmentioned here, one can't help thinking that this film retrospective, catalogue, and DVD set were assembled as a direct response to an earlier internationally touring retrospective and its catalogue, *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema*, organised by the American Federation of Arts in 1976.

In that narrative, American avant-garde cinema literally begins with Maya Deren in 1943. 'The precursors and models of the American avant-garde film', the catalogue told us, 'are the avant-garde films produced in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s and the cinema of the Soviet Union produced during the late 1920s'. End of story.¹ But Bruce Posner, in a 15-page pamphlet included in the DVD set, dismisses the notion that 'there was NO early American avant-garde cinema' as a 'fairy tale', a seductive fiction from which it is long since time to awaken.

There were good institutional reasons for the defence of one particular concept of avant-garde cinema in the 1960s, and the Museum of Modern Art, the Anthology Film Archives, and the New York University Cinema Studies department, as well as the American Federation of the Arts, all expended considerable energy in establishing it. Those standing in the way, like Amos Vogel, wound up in the dust bin of history, at least for awhile.

Historians have recently begun to pick apart these battles, documenting the series of academic and curatorial strategies that led to the triumph of the cinematic vision canonized in the touring AFA show. Posner enters the fray with ammunition of his own. Not only was there an earlier American avant-garde, he insists, but its history was consciously suppressed, its accomplishments consigned to the realm of the 'unseen'. To win this argument, he assembles 19 hours of film and asks us to believe the evidence of our own eyes.

The set is a treasure trove, an elegantly produced collection of rarities, and a few familiar favour-

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Fig. 1. Emlen Etting's *Oramunde* (1933) from *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894–1941*. [Courtesy of Anthology Film Archives.]



ites, which takes full advantage of the possibilities of this digital format (ironic, though, that the vehicle responsible for rehabilitating the reputation of this avant-garde is a technology which its creators would never have imagined). Image quality is nearly always superior to existing show prints, and considerably better than battered 16mm library copies. Projection speeds have been 'corrected'. Great care has gone into the musical accompaniments. Some titles are presented without sound, 'as intended'; many are sensitively scored by excellent contemporary musicians, including Donald Sosin, Robert Israel and Rodney Sauer; at times, such historic accompaniments as George Antheil's for *Ballet mécanique* have been scrupulously recreated. (*Ballet mécanique* can find a home here because, in line with another strand of historical revisionism, it is now largely attributed to Dudley Murphy.) Orchestrating all this was an accomplishment of great judgment and skill. Negotiating with numerous film archives and artists' estates could not have been an easy task – not to mention raising the funding for so elaborate a package. David Shepard, Bruce Posner and Robert Haller are all to be congratulated, along with Cineric and the other underwriters.

Of course, knowledge of this early period had not completely disappeared. In 1968 Lewis Jacobs reprinted his seminal 1947 essay on American experimental film in the new edition of *Rise of the American Film*, a widely distributed text.² A few others, like Herman G. Weinberg and Cecile Starr, also

continued to write about the movement as if no quantum shift had occurred. Yet for almost a generation, most critics viewed this past only through the prism of New American Cinema. Anthology Film Archives – which deserves considerable credit for the entire *Unseen Cinema* project – was itself essentially a creature of this 1970s orthodoxy. But when an idea's time has come, things have a way of moving very quickly. Jan-Christopher Horak published his collection *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avant-Garde, 1919–1945* in 1995. Bruce Posner curated a film retrospective with this same title in 1999, which two years later morphed into the expanded *Unseen Cinema*. In the catalogue for that show, Posner expressed hope that all this attention might speed the discovery of additional 'lost' films known only through reputation. Five years later some of those films are already here on the DVD set, including Lewis Jacobs's *Footnote to Fact* (1933) and Robert Florey's *Skyscraper Symphony* (1929), two remarkable discoveries definitely worth waiting for.

In reviewing such a set, does one assess the concept or the contents? Unlike some other treasure boxes, this is no hodge-podge of available miscellany: there is an argument to be made. Instead of fostering one narrow strand of creativity, the package tells us, *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film* will highlight 'experimental film as a product of avant-garde artists, of professional directors and of amateur moviemakers'. So we have the seeds of a dilemma right on the cover of the box. Are we dealing with *avant-garde film* or *experimental film*? Or can the terms be used interchangeably? Is the avant-garde a subset of the experimental? Is it worth defining these terms at all? Whether you think so or not, you won't find much of a definition here. Certainly none that stretches far enough to include the non-commercial *genre du jour*, home movies.

I enjoyed the selection here of Archie Stewart's home movies, and I loved Joseph Cornell's trilogy of children's films. I just don't know what essential element ties them together – especially on a disc devoted to 'The Amateur as Auteur' that also features a selection of Theodore Case's early sound test footage. Why are these folks more 'amateur' than those on the other discs? I found no useful answers, and eventually I stopped bothering to look for them. Skip the argument. Look at the films.

Disc 1, 'The Mechanized Eye: Experiments in Technique and Form' (which could very well have served as a title for the entire set), is a good example.

The contents juxtapose things like Billy Bitzer's footage of the Westinghouse Works (1904), Emlen Etting's *Poem 8* (1932–33) and the Nykino agit-prop, *Pie in the Sky* (1934–35). Well, it certainly touches all three bases – professional directors, avant-garde artists and amateur movie makers. A highlight here is the work of Emlen Etting, a painter/filmmaker who would seem a likely ancestor of the post-war avant-garde movement, if he had not dropped off the radar by the 1970s. While most of his contemporaries were divided between abstraction and documentary, Etting's *Poem 8* looks more like something that could have been made by Sidney Peterson or Gregory Markopoulos in 1950.

Disc 2, 'The Devil's Plaything: American Surrealism', has a similarly unhelpful title. While the disc includes more work of Joseph Cornell, the brief notes tend to describe the films (such as *The Fall of the House of Usher*) as 'expressionist'. The most startling title, James Sibley Watson and Alec Wilder's *Tomatoes Another Day* (1930–33) is a deadpan Dadaist exercise at the expense of early Hollywood talkies.

Disc 3, 'Light Rhythms: Music and Abstraction', includes a number of silent titles, but mainly abstract synchronizations by such filmmakers as Mary Ellen Bute and Norman McLaren. Hollywood dance numbers (Busby Berkeley) and montage sequences (Slavko Vorkapich) are given equal time. Some of the Vorkapich sequences (not just *The Firefly*, but also *Crime Without Passion*) are presented in Vorkapich's original versions, once available only to those who attended his landmark lecture series.

Disc 4, 'Inverted Narratives: New Directions in Storytelling', begins with D.W. Griffith's *The House with Closed Shutters* (1910), a nice film from a director whose work is usually seen as *establishing* the Hollywood mode of representation, not pulling away from it. But look at *The World Today: Black Legion* (1936–37), Nykino's 'answer' to *The March of Time*, which proves to be an important missing piece in the history of workers' cinema, and one of the real finds on this set. Who cares whether anyone, including the filmmakers, ever saw it as 'avant-garde'?

Disc 5, 'Picturing a Metropolis: New York City Unveiled', has been made available for sale individually (although the price for the entire set is already an incredible bargain). Here are excellent copies of the familiar Sheeler, Strand, Flaherty and Leyda classics, but don't miss *Footnote to Fact*.

Disc 6, 'The Amateur as Auteur: Discovering

Paradise in Pictures', is a mash of home movies and early sound test footage. Very little of this qualifies as avant-garde under anyone's definition, but I'm still glad to have some of these titles on my shelf.

Disc 7, 'Viva la Dance: the Beginnings of Ciné-Dance', is, like the New York disc, a useful compilation of early commercial cinema and classic experimental movie. One wonders if NBC ever broadcast Norman McLaren's charming *NBC Valentine Greeting* (1939–40), a jittering white-on-black animation which might have overwhelmed the insensitive television technology of 1940 (yes, the set runs from Edison's kinetoscope to Zworykin's kinescope).

Treasures and discoveries on every disc, and if home movies, radical workers' cinema, imaginative Hollywood dance numbers and self-consciously experimental art films all need to be stamped 'avant-garde' to get in the door, the worst that can happen is a long overdue critical debate. In 1945, the editor of *Movie Makers*, house organ of the Amateur Cinema League, praised the author of that month's lead article, 'Efficient or Effective? Stating the Case for Imaginative Filming': 'Maya Deren ... is a gal who, we firmly believe, will bear watching. And, with your kind approval, we propose to continue doing same.'³ Posner, I'm sure, wouldn't disagree. He just wouldn't want us to lose track of the bigger picture.

Notes

1. John G. Hanhardt, 'The Medium Viewed: The American Avant-Garde Film', in *A History of the American Avant-Garde Film* (New York: American Federation of the Arts, 1976), 31.
2. Jacobs published 'Experimental Cinema in America' in two issues of *Hollywood Quarterly* (III, 2, Winter 1947–48, 111–124 and III, 3, Spring 1948, 278–292); it appeared in book form as 'Avant-Garde Production in America' in Roger Manvell (ed.), *Experiment in the Film* (London: Grey Walls Press, 1949), then reverted to its original title when reissued as a 'supplement' to Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1968). It would seem that Jacobs was himself unsure of the most appropriate term.
3. See 'Closeups – What filmers are doing', *Movie Makers* (June 1945): 233. Deren's article (201–211, 224–226) focuses on *Meshes of the Afternoon*. It begins: 'To most filmers there comes, sooner or later, the impulse to go beyond disconnected shots of children, pets, vacation scenery and friends and to attempt something in the way of an organized, imaginative movie'.