

Review Essay

Archives of Modernist Cinephilia

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***Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film, 1894–1941.* Curated by Bruce Posner and produced by David Shepard. Released by Anthology Film Archives, Preservation Film Associates, and Image Entertainment, 2005. 7 DVDs. Running time: 19 hours, 55 minutes. \$74.99.**

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Anthology Film Archives's recent DVD collection, *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film, 1894–1941*, offers nothing less than a fundamental redefinition of American avant-garde film and an expansive, iconoclastic vision of experimental film practice that should be enthusiastically welcomed by anyone invested in widening the cultural playing field of the modern. This final fruit of a much broader project of scholarly revisionism is, aptly enough, immense. With a running time of over nineteen hours, and including 155 films, many of which are rare and previously unavailable on DVD, *Unseen Cinema* hopes to make part of its revisionist argument about the early American avant-garde—that such a thing, in fact, *existed* before Maya Deren—through sheer volume. Size matters, then, but so does style, and the collection's surprising choices and irreverent juxtapositions add up to a kind of modernist *Wunderkammer* with the sympathetic expansiveness of Whitman's catalogues and the campy *curiositas* of Guy Maddin. Alongside canonical works like Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta* (1921) or Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924), this embarrassment of digital riches finds room for early cinematic innovations; the cine-juvenalia of Orson Welles; Hollywood mavericks like Busby Berkeley, Slavko Vorkapich, and Robert Florey; corporate documentaries; the home-movies of one Archie Stewart, a car dealer from Newburgh, New York; and the cinematic debut of a lantern-jawed, inevitably bare-torsoed twenty-four-year-old Charlton Heston in David Bradley's *Peer Gynt* (1941). As astonishing, as dazzling, and as seemingly inexhaustible as those eye-popping Busby Berkeley dance numbers that feature so prominently in it, *Unseen Cinema* is a major achievement in film preservation and film history. It is also an indispensable archive for

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the explosion of scholarly interest in cinematic modernisms, modernism's visual culture, and the place of cinema in the cultures of early twentieth-century modernity.

The *Unseen Cinema* box set is only the most public product of a broad international effort of film preservation and a decades-old project of revisionist film historiography. Spearheaded by Anthology Film Archives, the archival and preservation work has drawn on, while making preservation masters of, films from the world's leading film archives, including the Museum of Modern Art, Anthology Film Archives, the George Eastman House, the Library of Congress, the British Film Institute, Deutsches Filmmuseum, and a range of regional archives. The preservation campaign was accompanied by *Unseen Cinema*, the traveling international film retrospective curated by Bruce Posner, independent filmmaker and historian, who has also edited the accompanying exhibition catalog. The ongoing exhibition itself premiered in 2001, and has now toured over fifty universities, museums, and archives worldwide, including most recently the Netherlands Architecture Institute, the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, and visits the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 2007.

Posner's chief editorial goal is "altruistic": "to reclaim early American avant-garde film and to establish its accomplishments" by presenting "the broadest possible spectrum of experimental films produced between the 1890s and the 1940s."¹ In Posner's capacious view, experimental cinema is "the product of avant-garde artists, of Hollywood directors, and of amateur movie-makers working collectively and as individuals at all levels of film production during the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century" (*UC*, 42). This baggy definition of avant-gardism, surely too catholic for some, sustains Posner's most readily discernable revisionist claims: that early cinema was always already avant-garde; that, rather than functioning as commercial film's resistant other, avant-garde film "grew hand-in-hand with the supremacy of the Hollywood film as a social-economic institution"; and that the films of the early American avant-garde were "strictly American in attitude" rather than slavish derivatives of their European models (*UC*, 40).

The particular roster of films at the core of Posner's recovery effort, and, indeed, the larger revisionist view of the American avant-garde presented in the *Unseen Cinema* film and DVD retrospective are indebted to Jan-Christopher Horak's 1995 anthology *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avant-Garde, 1919–1945*, and beyond that, to Lewis Jacobs's pioneering 1947 essay "Experimental Cinema in America, 1921–1947." Posner himself foregrounds his debt to Horak's work in his essay accompanying the box set, and Horak provides the exhibition catalog's foreword, essentially a *précis* of his argument in the earlier book. As Horak tells it in *Lovers of Cinema*, the traditional narrative of American avant-garde cinema goes something like this: avant-garde film is a child of the 1920s, spawn of that fervent swirl of so-called "historical" avant-gardes (Futurism, dadism, surrealism, constructivism) that give us *Un chien andalou* (1929) and *L'âge d'or* (1930), *Anémic cinéma* (1926), *Emak Bakia* (1926), and *L'étoile de mer* (1928), *Ballet mécanique* (1924), and *Ghosts Before Breakfast* (1928). Nourished by vital art cinema and ciné-club movements on the continent, the first avant-garde perishes with the coming of sound, the global depression, and the rise of fascism. In the wake of the Second World War, European émigrés on the East and West Coasts (Man Ray, Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger) helped catalyze a second—and, so the story goes, America's *first*—avant-garde, protagonized by Deren, Sidney Peterson, Gregory Markopolous, Kenneth Anger, and Harry Smith, among others. This avant-garde is then followed by the transatlantic raft of 1960s experimenters and underground denizens—Stan Brakhage, Peter Kubelka, Michael Snow, Ron Rice, the Kuchar Brothers—presided over, with missionary zeal, by Jonas Mekas, and given institutional support by the founding of the Filmmakers Cinémathèque, Canyon Cinema, and Anthology Film Archives itself.

Horak's *Lovers of Cinema* contested this genealogy, one reified by P. Adams Sitney's classic study of the postwar American avant-garde's modernist romanticism, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–1948*, by painstakingly recovering a counter-archive of early American avant-garde production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. Avant-garde and art films, American and European, were screened in a host of "Little Cinemas" across the nation, in Marius de Zayas's and Julien Levy's art galleries, and in Alfred Stieglitz's An American Place. Experimental production and distribution networks were encouraged by the founding of Artkino in 1925, the Amateur Cinema League in 1926, The Cinema Crafters of Philadelphia and the

Cinema Club of Rochester in 1928, and the Workers Film and Photo League in 1930. A number of periodicals also emerged in America and Europe devoted to championing publicly the cause of experimental, amateur, and avant-garde filmmaking, including *Experimental Cinema*, *Film Art*, *Amateur Movie-Maker*, and the *National Board of Review Magazine*, and *Close-Up*, edited by Kenneth Macpherson, H. D., and Bryher, and with frequent contributions by the American critics Harry A. Potamkin and Herman Weinberg. Thus, Horak argued convincingly that “while the first American avant-garde relied on an institutional framework that was less well developed than that of the postwar avant-garde, their efforts did not exist in a complete vacuum, as has been previously assumed.”² Like *Unseen Cinema*, *Lovers of Cinema* insisted that early cinema’s “multifarious discursive practices were indeed avant-garde, so that the concept of an avant-garde in opposition to the norm appears only after the institutionalization of classical narrative in the mid-teens” (LC, 5). And, like Posner, Horak argues for a broadened definition of the avant-garde to include the sort of institutionally, privately, or state-funded documentary film production that, during the Great Depression, would become the bread and butter of experimentalists like Roger Barlow, Irving Lerner, LeRoy Robbins, Ralph Steiner, and Paul Strand.

In these instances, avant-gardism was, perforce, hired labor, but Horak insists on a fundamental discrepancy in self-understanding between the early and postwar avant-gardes. The latter proclaimed themselves independent filmmakers whose films, in Mekas’s shamanic language, were “like extensions of our own pulse, of our heartbeat, of our eyes, our fingertips they are so personal,” and whose only work was “to surround the early with our film frames and warm it up—until it begins to move.”³ But this romantic freedom was paid for by an institutional network of material support in the form of government and foundation grants and university film courses. Ironically, this second avant-garde’s anti-utilitarian rejection of commerce and industry masked what Horak called the “romanticized professionalization of the avant-garde project” (LC, 15).⁴ The first avant-garde, by contrast, saw themselves as cineastes, as *amateurs* concerned with film as an art, and thus free to float between avant-garde filmmaking and their various day jobs as film industry workers (Robert Florey, Dudley Murphy, and Warren Newcombe), film critics (Theodore Huff, Seymour Stern, Herman G. Weinberg), photographers (Strand and Steiner), or commercial illustrators (Douglass Crockwell).

But what, for Horak and Posner, are the stakes of these distinct self-conceptions of the first and second avant-gardes? Is the point that the idea of a completely autonomous avant-garde aesthetic is always a romantic fiction, albeit one that the second avant-garde swallowed more uncritically than the first? (Even Clement Greenberg, whose name has become synonymous with modernist autonomy, knew that the avant-garde was connected to the bourgeoisie with “an umbilical cord of gold.”) Or that honest professionalism and honest amateurism are always better than professionalism masquerading as fun and games? A grumpy and newly conservative Parker Tyler, decrying the seeming abandonment of aesthetic standards in the New York Cinémathèque, observed a similar kind of bad faith in 1966: “I would say that today the reigning standard of the avant-garde is a deliberately cultivated amateurism. And amateurism, as systematically, ‘critically’ encouraged, can be just as bad as its converse, professionalism. Certain kinds of ‘avant-garde’ amateurism are mere parodies of professionalism.”⁵ But Tyler’s point is an evaluative one: there is a surfeit of bad amateurs in avant-garde filmmaking, and what’s worse, they deny they are, in fact, bad professionals, when what is really needed are *better* professional artists with more discerning standards. The upshot? When it comes to avant-garde art, it’s best to leave it to the pros. Horak’s point seems to be more pragmatic: the trafficking between amateur avant-garde filmmaking and professional practice produced an aesthetic cross-fertilization that revitalized both experimental art and industrial innovation, while blurring conventional boundaries between these domains—spheres that, as historians of early cinema have long known, were never really all that separate in the first place.

In his exhibition catalogue, Posner himself is never this forthcoming about the critical payoff of his archival project for scholarly understandings of the avant-garde. In fact, the *Unseen Cinema* catalog is a rather uneven collection of scholarly essays by contemporary critics and historians, as well as working notes, transcribed lectures, and critical writings by figures historically associated with the first American avant-garde (Lewis Jacobs, Henwar Rodakiewicz, Robert Flaherty, and Orson Welles, to name a few). A number of the essays, including Horak’s essay on Maurice

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Tourneur's *The Bluebird* (1918), Kenneth Anger's hilarious essay on Alla Nazimova's *Salomé* (1922), and Lynda Jessup's piece on J. S. Watson, Jr.'s 1927–28 ethnography *Nass River Indians*, discuss films included in the traveling retrospective but not in the DVD collection. Among the stronger critical essays in the volume, Scott MacDonald offers a compelling investigation of the influence of the landscape painting of Thomas Cole and Frederic Church on the genre of nature actualities in early cinema, which he reads as attempts to "incorporate nature within larger technologic systems" (UC, 58). And R. Bruce Elder's essay "The American Vanguard: Flux and Experience" locates the primacy of perception in American avant-garde film within a broader modernist philosophy of radical empiricism in America encompassing William James, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson. Strikingly, neither Posner, nor most of the other contributions to the exhibition catalog, ever mentions specific theories of the avant-garde per se.⁶ The familiar names—Adorno, Benjamin, Brecht, Bürger, Marcuse, Poggioli, Krauss, Foster, and the like—are absent.

An important exception here, and easily the best and most critically rigorous essay in the volume, is David E. James's "Hollywood Extras: One Tradition of Avant-Garde Film in Los Angeles." Using the expressionist-influenced *Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* (1927) as a case study, James explores the complex negotiations between the avant-garde and Hollywood through the careers of the films' three authors, Swiss journalist-cum-Hollywood assistant director Robert Florey, Yugoslav expat and future dreamfactory montage wizard Slavko Vorkapich, and Gregg Toland, then an assistant cameraman at MGM and ultimately one of Hollywood's most accomplished cinematographers. James reads *A Hollywood Extra* not just as an avant-garde critique of the exploitation of the Hollywood worker but as one whose experimentalism finds parallels "in earlier and later industry films," just as its experimentalists "went on to professional careers in which they circulated through both core and periphery of the industry" (UC, 47). For James, the "overall porousness of formal and practical boundaries" links "the various practices of cinema and suggests that the avant-garde should be understood, not as completely other, but as a series of interstitial movements and impulses within the hegemony of the dominant mode of film production" (UC, 48). The specious opposition of authentic art and mass culture, James argues, is one that post-Second World War film studies inherited, variously, from Frankfurt School or Greenbergian modernisms, and that should now be supplanted by a more nuanced attention to the ways non-industrial film practices mark their positions "on the margins of or interstitial within the industry" (UC, 45). This avant-garde is not dialectically oppositional but subversively minoritarian.⁷

At this point, one might reasonably complain that *Unseen Cinema* in fact uses the term avant-gardism synonymously with modernist experimentation, or even more broadly, formal innovation writ large. If so, then *Unseen Cinema*'s canon courts danger on two fronts. On the one hand, it risks occluding the radical politics that, for many, are the *sine qua non* of any avant-gardism worth the martial heritage of the name, whether that politics is understood as "the reintegration of art into the *praxis* of life," in Peter Bürger's famous formulation, or wedded to social movements based on sexual or ethnic identity, or grounded in the radical materialism of structuralism, or counter-cinematic Brechtianism, or the underground's queer *détournement* of popular culture, or any combination of these counter-hegemonic practices. After all, it's all well and good to expand the term "modernism," as Miriam Bratu Hansen has, to include "vernacular" formations like classical Hollywood cinema. But once modernism encompasses all "cultural practices that both articulated and mediated the experience of modernity, such as the mass-produced and mass-consumed phenomena of fashion, design, advertising, architecture and urban environment, of photography and cinema," then any aesthetic response to the "sensory-reflexive horizon" of modernity is a kind of modernism.⁸ Shouldn't, though, one preserve a distinction between the Soviet avant-gardism of a film like Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925) and the slapstick modernism that energizes its style—and that is, in some respects, a product of Americanization under the fag of D. W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin? On the other hand, the collection may be seen as passing off as radical an utterly uncontroversial, even banal, claim: that American cinema between 1894 and 1941 hosted a wide array of innovative cinematic practice. The avant-garde of *Unseen Cinema* charts a course through perilous terminological waters between the Scylla of politicized and the Charybdis of universal innovation.

To address both challenges, I turn more directly to the films of *Unseen Cinema*. Given the sheer number and range of films contained within it, “one of the profound conflicts that will face the viewer of this retrospective,” Posner observes, “is how to assess the numerous, divergent approaches displayed by the early cinemas” (*UC*, 41). Posner has opted to organize the seven-disc collection through the following topoi: “The Mechanized Eye: Experiments in Technique and Form”; “The Devil’s Plaything: American Surrealism”; “Light Rhythms: Music and Abstraction”; “Inverted Narratives: New Directions in Storytelling”; “Picturing a Metropolis: New York City Unveiled”; “The Amateur as Auteur: Discovering Paradise in Pictures”; and “Viva la Dance: The Beginnings of Ciné-Dance.” The gambit, then, is a provocative juxtaposition within these seven overarching rubrics, in the hope that the irreverent proximity of these films to each other will “provide a light under which to examine these early experimental efforts” (*UC*, 41).

The organizing rubrics themselves match fairly closely the taxonomy provided by Horak in *Lovers of Cinema*: to wit, the symbolic and the surrealist, painting in motion, short stories/experimental narrative, the poetics of urban space, and Terpsichore on film. Two of Horak’s more tightly-focused rubrics—“parodies as avant-garde critique,” which charts the turn of the 1930s avant-garde to political satire and proto-postmodern citationality; and “lyrical nature,” which traces a specifically American romanticism “seemingly far from the European modernist project”—lose their organizing function in *Unseen Cinema*, as the key films discussed by Horak under these headings get redistributed (*LC*, 38). Nykino and Elia Kazan’s burlesque of religion’s compensatory promises in Depression-era America, *Pie in the Sky* (1934–1935), now appears in the catch-all disc, “The Mechanized Eye,” Posner’s baggiest rubric and the one with the least explanatory power. Its experimentalism embraces, for example, five of Edison’s “Paris Exposition Films” from 1900; Walker Evans’s *Travel Notes* (1931–1932), a stark and stunning documentary of his voyage to Tahiti; and two of Horak’s examples of “lyrical nature”: Arkino’s *Oil: A Symphony in Motion* (1933), a paean to modern industry with a stentorian voice-over by oil itself, and Henwar Rodakiewicz’s lovely *Portrait of a Young Man* (1924–1931). The latter is a fifty-four minute meditative exercise in subjective Bildung consisting entirely, as an intertitle has it, “the things [this young man] likes and his manner of liking them: the sea, leaves, clouds, smoke, machinery, sunlight, the interplay of forms and rhythms, but above all—the sea.” Roger Barlow, Harry Hay, and LeRoy Robbins’s witty parody of surrealist and constructivist visual style, *Even as You and I* (1937), and Theodore Huff’s *Little Geezer* (1932), a brilliant send-up of Warner Brothers gangster films and Soviet montage (starring, perversely, vamping, tommy-gun-toting, cigarette-smoking child actors!), appear in the equally diffuse disc on narrative and storytelling. William Vance and Orson Welles’s baffling expressionist lark *Hearts of Age* (1934), now functions as an example of “American Surrealism,” even though—and perhaps because—Welles told Peter Bogdanovich that the film was not surrealistic, but rather “just a charade. Sunday-afternoon fun out on the lawn. I don’t much care for surrealism on the screen” (*UC*, 141).

The presence of the most explicitly political films in the collection is most welcome, especially since all were previously unavailable on DVD—not just *Pie in the Sky*, but also Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand’s anti-fascist *Native Land* (1937–1941), Nykino’s *The World Today: Black Legion* (1936–1937), and Lewis Jacobs’s *Footnote to Fact* (1933). But when they’re called into duty to exemplify “inverted narratives,” as the Nykino films are, or summoned as “pictures of the metropolis,” as Jacobs’s harrowing vision of economic despair and suicide is, what happens to their politics? Obviously, Posner has no need to be faithful to Horak’s topology, although one wishes he did more to clarify the critical function of his own and to put the films more directly into dialogue with current scholarly conversations. The place to do this would be either the program notes that introduce each film, or the “Bios” CD-ROM extra, a slideshow of over two hundred panels that accompanies each disc. Both of these features are written by an impressive international lineup of film scholars and historians. The CD-ROM contains some interesting illustrations and photographs, and useful biographical sketches, but little in the way of curatorial or scholarly claims. The program notes, which range from a few sentences to a few short paragraphs in length, are fairly self-contained comments on the individual works, offering helpful bits of context and brief observations about the particular technical innovations of the films, but lacking insight as to what each film may suggest within its particular topological field.

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Even a glimpse of the titles named above suggests fruitful interventions in contemporary debates. Occasionally, the notes point to suggestive continuities between the film at hand and later, more familiar, modes of avant-garde practice, but these remain gestures rather than claims, much less arguments. For example, one might ask for a more explicit consideration of how to place Evans's cinematic travel diaries in relationship to the anthropological and ethnographic practices so central to modernity's visual culture.⁹ How, alternatively, might Rodakiewicz's underacknowledged self-portrait help write a new chapter in the story of the modernist bildungsroman, which has recently received renewed critical attention?¹⁰ How does the satiric turn in 1930s experimental filmmaking practice add to our understanding of the centrality of satire in so-called "late modernism" or complicate the already vexed status of modernism in that decade?¹¹ And is the characterization of Welles as a surrealist more than editorial contrarianism? It seems to further the increasingly dominant line among Wellesians that RKO's boy genius best be understood not as a one hit wonder but a career-long experimentalist who happened to make one Hollywood triumph.¹²

The mixed success of the collection's organizational strategy is manifest in the latent revisionist argument at work in the "American Surrealism" disc, the only one to name explicitly an avant-garde movement, and thus the disc most likely to court controversy. The lineup consists of four early cinematic works; two examples of experimental dream sequences within mainstream Hollywood features in the silent era; six canonical films of Horak's first American avant-garde (including Florey's *A Hollywood Extra* and *The Love of Zero* (1928), J. S. Watson, Jr. and Melville Webber's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1926–1928), Charles Klein's *The Telltale Heart* (1928), Watson and Alec Wilder's *Tomatos Another Day* (*sic*) (1930/1933), and Welles's *The Hearts of Age*); and four stunning films by Joseph Cornell. More than anything else, this eclectic roster reminds us that, while there are a number of canonical films made by actual surrealists and surrealist fellow travelers (from Buñuel and Dalí's *Un chien andalou* [1929] and *L'âge d'or* [1930], Germaine Dulac and Antonin Artaud's *La coquille et le clergyman* [1928], or Man Ray and Robert Desnos's *L'étoile de mer* [1928]), to the contemporary Czech surrealism of Jan Švankmajer and more elusive and uncategorizable dream puzzles of Raúl Ruiz), cinematic surrealism exists not in any clearly definable style or list of traits, or even a compendium of works, but most vitally as an *activity* or practice, a shared attitude or moral sensibility.

Of course, as early surrealist writings on cinema make clear, the experience of cinema was inherently surrealist, a modern mystery suspending logic and rationality in the oneiric half-light of the theater, throwing off the lustrous sparks of the romantic image through the fantastic juxtapositions of montage, and, in its optical magnifications, laying bare the marvelous substratum of everyday modernity. As Louis Aragon explained in his 1918 essay "On décor," cinematic technology was an instrument of re-enchantment, puncturing the real with eruptive indices of the unconscious: "on the screen, objects that were a few moments ago sticks of furniture or books of cloakroom tickets are transformed to the point where they take on menacing or enigmatic meanings."¹³ In this activity, popular and commercial cinema played an historically vital role as a terrain of surrealist investigation. We see this in their early enthusiasm for the involuntary surrealism of Georges Méliès and Emile Cohl and the parables of surrealist comportment extracted from the films of Keaton and Chaplin or from the French serials of Louis Feuillade, whose arch-criminal Fantômas became a kind of emblem of the anti-social repudiation of bourgeois property and propriety.

Given these mass-cultural investments, one can see quite readily how surrealism is a particularly apt referent for Posner's curatorial project. Like historical surrealism, *Unseen Cinema* asks us to revisit early American cinema as a dream landscape of fantastic transformations and poetic enchantments. In this, it is modestly successful. Surely the surrealist would have appreciated the multiple exposures, the fantastic dissolves, and other trick shots of Edwin S. Porter's *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1902), or the strong influence of Méliès on Porter's *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906), a parable of disturbed and demonically possessed sleep of the bourgeoisie sparked by its own gluttonous appetite. And Vitagraph's *The Thieving Hand* (1907), a comedy about an honest and limbless man rewarded with a criminally-minded prosthesis, is a mini-masterpiece of the surrealist uncanny, proving once again that our bodies are disorganized by desires that never seem, properly speaking, our own.

But other selections seem far less convincing exemplars of surrealist activity and attitude, voluntary or otherwise. The excerpts from the odd dream sequences in Douglas Fairbank's *When the Clouds Roll By* (1918) and Paramount's *Beggar on Horseback* (1925) are studiously oneiric and formally experimental interludes, and seem of a piece with, say, Dalí's dream sequence in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), reviled by most surrealists as bowdlerization at the hands of "Avida Dollars." These excerpts don't summon the hallucinatory violence of the surrealist sensibility with the urgency of, say, Busby Berkeley's "Lullaby of Broadway" sequence from *Gold Diggers of 1935*, included on the metropolis-themed disc. Nor do they deploy the power of surrealist incongruity—Lautréamont's chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella—with the fair or political resonance of Christopher Boughman Young's *Object Lesson* (1941), billed by Young as "America's first surrealist film," and placed by Posner on the "Inverted Narratives" disc (*LC*, 54). And while Edgar Allan Poe, as Breton insisted, is a surrealist in temperament, the Poe adaptations on the disc are much more under the sway of Caligaris than in the service of black humor's aristocratic repudiation of the traumatic, material world. Here, in fact, Posner seems at cross-purposes with Horak and Lewis Jacobs, since, while Posner wants to downplay the influence of Expressionism in the service of his uniquely American canon, Horak and Jacobs insist on it. Jacobs even offers a convincing explanation of why three important films of this American avant-garde were based on Poe's work: "Poe's stories were not only short and in the public domain, but depended more upon atmosphere and setting than upon characterization. What particularly kindled the imagination of the experimenter was the haunting, evocative atmosphere which brought to mind similar values in memorable German pictures which like *Caligari* had made a deep impression."¹⁴ Similarly, it's hard to buy Watson and Wilder's *Tomatos Another Day*, a send-up of the stilted and redundant dialogue of early sound film, as surrealist in any meaningful way. While the film seems exceedingly fresh today, its anarchism and linguistic nonsense is much more dadaist in spirit. The parodic, affectless love triangle at its ironic heart is a far cry from the obscene passions of Gaston Modot and Lya Lys's *amour fou* in *L'âge d'or*—for example, Lys's displaced act of fellatio upon the toe of a garden statue or the way the couple trade fantasies of slaughtered children and violent mobs to get their erotic kicks.

On one level, then, *Unseen Cinema* reminds us that, for surrealism, part of the utility of popular cinema hinged on its very imperfections and cultural disrepute. As a repository of the *insolite*, commercial film—fueling the slumbering fantasies of the dreaming collective—was a weapon in the surrealist war against the cultural value hierarchies of the bourgeoisie and the positivist stasis of the social order, enslaved by the reality principle. On another, more profound level, surrealism offered a theory of mass and popular culture that consistently blurred the boundaries between elite aesthetic practice and Hollywood's everyday business of dreams. In their libidinous lingering on cinematic detail (think of the fetishistic "irrational enlargements" of Joseph von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture* [1941]), surrealism modeled a radical and perverse kind of cinematic pleasure, showing how irrational and deeply personal meanings would follow from the very shock of the encounter between poetic thought and filmic object. Long before the ideologically shackled spectator of apparatus theory would be challenged by cultural studies' various calls for more attention to subjective agency, surrealist cinema had put into practice a model of cinematic spectatorship that would allow for subversive, excessive, and affectively charged reworkings of even the most banal Hollywood fare. "I ask you," surrealist Ado Kyrou exhorted in 1963, "learn to go and see the 'worst' films, they sometimes are sublime."¹⁵

Perhaps no surrealist put this lesson into practice better than Joseph Cornell. One of modernism's great magpies, Cornell was also a brilliant filmmaker who made a few dozen films between the 1930s and the 1960s, some of them lyrical documentaries of New York, but many of them cinematic collages compiled from comic shorts, science films, nature documentaries, circus pictures, travelogues, and all the scrounged detritus of his engorged cinephilia. If a new critical thesis about "American Surrealism" doesn't finally come into focus in *Unseen Cinema*, this is easily forgiven because of the pride of place accorded to the Cornell films: both the four on the surrealism disc (*The Children's Jury*, *Thimble Theater*, *Carousel-Animal Opera*, and *Jack's Dream*) and the three comprising Cornell's "Children's Party" collage trilogy (*The Children's Party*, *Cotillion*, and *The Midnight Party*), which appear on the *Amateur as Auteur* disc. These inclusions are especially timely. While there has been renewed critical attention to the infu-

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ence of Cornell's cinematic imagination on his box-constructions, consideration of his work as a filmmaker has largely been restricted to his first and best-known film, *Rose Hobart* (1936). A meticulous re-editing of Universal Pictures' 1931 jungle melodrama *East of Borneo*, the film is a stunningly obsessive homage to one of his favorite screen divas. However, this work has done little to revise Cornell's longstanding critical reputation as an uncomplicated romantic, a nostalgic modern haunted, in P. Adams Sitney's terms, by the "aesthetic mediation of experience."¹⁶ This is unfortunate, since Cornell's diaries provide suggestive evidence that the artist saw film as a *public* medium, a mode of expressing his humanism and of shifting his ethical capacities for care towards the incessant alterity of quotidian experience.¹⁷ Made newly available on *Unseen Cinema*, Cornell's collage films may energize current efforts to supplant the image of Cornell as a melancholic recluse. These films suggest that Cornell was a thoughtful and concerned citizen of the world, even though he accessed its otherness—as many of us do—through images. At the very least, Cornell's ingenious collage films enact the very inexhaustibility of the cinematic archive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that is, in many respects, the most energizing thesis of *Unseen Cinema*. There are, of course, many more treasures in this collection than I can possibly review here. I urge you to enter this new archive straight away. Bring gratitude, a good shovel, and a love equal to its subject.

Notes

1. *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893–1941*, ed. Bruce Posner (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 2001), 44. Henceforth abbreviated *UC*. Bruce Posner, "Where the Buffalo Roamed . . . Relative Histories of an Early American Avant-Garde Film," liner-notes essay from the *Unseen Cinema* box set.

2. Jan-Christopher Horak, ed. *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 28. Henceforth abbreviated *LC*.

3. Jonas Mekas. "Where are We, the Underground?," in *New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, Gregory Battcock, ed. (Dutton: New York, 1967), 20–21.

4. For a superb discussion of how Mekas's romanticism functioned on an everyday level, "in the realm of concrete social and economic realities," see Paul Arthur's "Routines of Emancipation: Jonas Mekas and Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties," in his recent *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 6.

5. Parker Tyler, "Is Film Criticism Only Propaganda?," in Battcock, *The New American Cinema*, 69.

6. For more expansive contexts for MacDonald and Elder's essays see, respectively, Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and R. Bruce Elder, *Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and Gertrude Stein* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1982).

7. James offers a fuller explanation of his theory of "minor" cinemas in Los Angeles, and his debt to Deleuze and Guattari, in *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), especially pages 11–19.

8. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6:2 (1999), 60.

9. See, for example, Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), Karen Jacobs, *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), and Marc Manganaro, *Culture, 1922 and After: Conversations in Anthropology and Literary Study* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

10. See Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006).

11. On satire's centrality to "late modernism," see Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). See also

Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996), and Michael Szalay's *American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

12. See Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Orson Welles as Ideological Challenge" in *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2002), and Joseph McBride, *What Ever Happened to Orson Welles?: A Portrait of an Independent Career* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006).

13. Aragon's essay is included in Paul Hammond's invaluable anthology *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), 52.

14. Lewis Jacobs, "Avant-Garde Production in America," in *Experiment in the Film*, ed. Roger Manvell (London: Grey Walls Press, Ltd., 1949), 121. See also "Unseen Cinema: An Interview with Bruce Posner," by John Conomos and Bill Mousoulis, *Senses of Cinema*, June 18, 2002 (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/festivals/02/21/posner.html>).

15. Hammond, *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, 71.

16. Sitney, "The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell," in *Joseph Cornell*, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 69. The language of nostalgia and loss also dominates the discussion of Cornell's cinematic investments in Jodi Hauptman's recent *Stargazing in the Cinema* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). A number of Cornell's other films have recently become available on another DVD and DVD-ROM project, The Voyager Foundation's *The Magic Worlds of Joseph Cornell* (<http://www.voyager-foundation.org/>).

17. For a reading of Cornell's filmmaking along these lines, see my chapter "Cornell's Tenderness" in *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming, 2007).