

Early avant-garde a trip Dazzling arsenal of vintage film Art infused work of first filmmakers

by Geoff Pevere

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Arguments for the movies' artistic potential can never be reiterated too often. That's especially the case after a week, like this past one, when the medium has been reduced to *Annapolis* and *Big Momma's House 2*. But it isn't just that *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894-1941*, the dauntingly comprehensive, seven-disc DVD set from Image Entertainment, makes such a powerful case for the movies as art, but that it makes the case that art may be the medium's natural state of expression.

With a dazzling arsenal (some 19 hours and 155 films' worth) of rare and vintage archival evidence, this Anthology Film Archives assembly argues that creative expression is so elementary to the appeal of the medium that, from the very first blinking of the motion picture lens, the defining odyssey was the search for new ways of seeing. By the turn of the last century, when the technology had been available for only a few years, filmmakers were already industriously engaged in using the medium as a means of turning the world inside-out: there are images dating to 1900 here that already qualify as trippy. If movies are a realist medium, this collection suggests that it was not by inclination that they became so. Free of commercial considerations, movies are as naturally realistic as dreams, the state of human experience they most closely resemble.

Curated by Bruce Posner, *Unseen Cinema* draws from some sixty international film collections to come up with an alternative history of the medium's first half-century in America. It is at once historically rigorous yet unflinchingly unorthodox. Which means that while much of what you'd expect is here - works by Edwin S. Porter, D.W. Griffith, Robert Flaherty, Orson Welles, Norman McLaren and Man Ray - there is also wave upon wave of the refreshingly unexpected: sequences from Hollywood musicals by Busby Berkeley, clips from films by Ernst Lubitsch, Soviet-inspired pro-labour documentaries, travelogues, city symphonies and some startlingly innovative amateur movies.

Viewed collectively, Posner's selections offer an exciting glimpse into an era when the making of movies, and even certain otherwise commercial movies, was almost intuitively radical. They were confronted with the new form's potential for restructuring time, space, narrative logic and - remember that this was also the popular heyday of Freud and abstract expressionism - and even consciousness itself. So the filmmakers represented in *Unseen Cinema* engaged in an epic process of deconstructing the world and re-making in new ways.

Obviously, you can see this impulse in the playful perceptual assaults of the Dadaists and surrealists, but it's also there in the working-stiff mainstream as well: in the adventurous Nickelodeon loops of Porter and Billy Bitzer, in the Soviet-styled Hollywood montage sequences designed by Slavko Vorkapich, and in Berkeley's breathtaking, and fulsomely anti-capitalist, "Lullaby of Broadway" sequence from *Gold Diggers of 1935*. While the revolutionary deployment of the medium was eagerly exploited by the era's burgeoning American culture of the left, included here are film experiments by the Group Theatre, anti-fascist newsreels and projects by such proudly red stalwarts as Paul Strand, Walker Evans and Lewis Jacobs. The revolution was everywhere.

More ambitiously multi-generic and historically irreverent than Kino on Video's recent, superb and similarly titled DVD set, *Unseen Cinema* may stray further from the established canon. But by doing so, it also brings up certain questions about inclusion. If the definition of avant-garde is determined by the intention to create new forms no matter what the context, then why stop at Busby Berkeley? What about the near-psychedelic cartoonery of the Fleischer brothers? Or the radical comic vision of Buster Keaton? And didn't Karl Marx have a brother named Groucho?

Possibly it's less a question of inconsistency than convenience, considering that even the seemingly arbitrary curatorial nature of *Unseen Cinema* has yielded a box already so stuffed with revelation. Divided into seven 2 1/2-plus-hour discs, featuring on-screen notes written by various scholars, critics and historians, showcasing different manifestations of Posner's unconventionally populist conception of the avant-garde impulse like *The Mechanized Eye*, *Inverted Narratives*, *Picturing a Metropolis* and *Viva la Dance*, *Unseen Cinema* offers considerably more than a history of early American cinema's striving toward a bold new vision of a brave new world.

By finding evidence of that striving everywhere, and suggesting that it is as basic to movies as light and shadow, this utterly remarkable and indispensable DVD set restores art to the very reason why movies exist.

Extras: On-screen notes and biographies for every film and a comprehensive essay by curator Bruce Posner.dvd scan

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