

NEW YORK PRESS

THE ORIGINAL AVANT-GARDE

By Jim Knipfel

I realize terms like "avant-garde" and "experimental" film make an awful lot of people shudder—and in many cases, justifiably so. So many of these movies seem nothing more than self-indulgent games that only the filmmakers themselves find interesting. No matter the aesthetic justification, who wants to watch an egg move back and forth across the screen for 45 minutes?

A century ago, right after the invention of motion pictures, every film made was an avant-garde film. People were seeing what they could do with these devices for the very first time. They were simultaneously artists, technicians and experimentalists. This doesn't mean they were shooting a lot of impenetrable artsy-fartsy crap—Edison was filming elephant electrocutions, cockfights and dancers. Others were filming cartoons. Still others were filming porn or New York street scenes. But it was all new, and perhaps as a result of the enthusiasm inherent in that newness, these films remain absolutely fascinating.



This weekend, The Museum of the Moving Image is running a two-day, four-part, 50-film series focusing on these earliest movies. The name, though, is a bit misleading. The films aren't exactly "unseen"—this same series played at Anthology a year or two ago. And even before that many of the films had been screened at art houses around the city. What's more, a seven-disc DVD set of the films in the series was released by Image Entertainment last month. (Not to be confused with a similar set released by Kino earlier this year.) And if you wanted to be really picky, a big handful of these films aren't even American.

But that's neither here nor there, I suppose—if you didn't catch Unseen Cinema when it played Anthology and you don't want to pick up the DVD set, this is a fine chance to see some films that represent what was not only a new art form at the time, but a new way of documenting the world as well.

The earliest, more straightforward films include Edison's blacksmith and barbershop shorts from 1893, a boxing match and a dozen others from around the same time. They're also screening some very early home movies, and have devoted an entire program on Sunday to films shot in and around New York.

There's stunning footage of Coney before the fires, of the early subway, of the Bronx and Fort Lee—and an awful lot of short films of bustling, early 20th century Manhattan. Books and costume dramas and photographs are one thing, but there's nothing quite like seeing how this city looked and moved a century ago

Moving into the 1920s and '30s, filmmakers like Slavko Vorkapich began making more experimental films (in the way we've come to understand the term). Vorkapich's are an odd lot—they seem almost normal on the surface, but are always just a little off somehow. Other filmmakers crafted purely aesthetic exercises.

Then there's the remarkably influential and brain-juggling *Ballet mecanique*, a Cubist film made by Fernand Leger and Dudley Murphy in 1924. Think of it as an industrial music video that seems to have inspired later artists from Ernie Kovacs to The Residents.

Given that the real focus behind the series is film restoration and preservation, a panel discussion will be held on Saturday afternoon to lay out the art, science and importance of protecting this record of our heritage.

All told (and its name aside) this is an important series for film lovers, artists, and history buffs alike.