

Editorial Review

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Avant-garde cinema remains unseen for all sorts of reasons. Because it's rare. Because it's elusive. Because the mainstream distribution and exhibition apparatus is not designed to serve it (and, arguably, to a large extent is designed to suppress and deny it). Because people--that vast army of us proud to be unpretentious "regular moviegoers"--basically don't want to see it, fearing that it's esoteric and challenging and probably boring. These are excellent--which is to say, very real--reasons. Except that, as of autumn 2005, they're obsolete. All but the personal-resistance part, anyway. Now, thanks to Anthology Film Archives, curator Bruce Posner, and the cooperation of the world's foremost film museums, anybody with a DVD player can make the acquaintance of 20some hours of definitive avant-garde film experiences through this often dazzling seven-disc set. And whaddaya know: a lot of "unseen cinema" turns out to be fascinating, thrilling, spectrally beautiful, tantalizingly mysterious--in a word, *eye-opening*, to both the art of film and the world we all share.

Moreover, it's not all precious, artist(or would-be artist)-in-a-garret stuff. Some of it has glimmered on regular movie screens, from nickelodeon days through the golden age of Hollywood, doing its avant-garde thing (often without knowing it's avant-garde) as one- and two-reel narratives or astonishing sequences in commercial Hollywood pictures. A 1910 D.W. Griffith two-reeler that compresses several decades (including the Civil War) into 16 minutes. Prologue and transitional montages that goosed up pedestrian feature films with lunges into jagged surrealism and abstraction. The erotically crazed, visually dynamic, sometimes nightmarish phantasmagoria that are Busby Berkeley's "By a Waterfall" and "Lullaby of Broadway."

In Posner's own words: "American experimental film has existed since the technological inception of cinema ... The background against which the experimentalists toiled provides a fascinating review of Americana coupled with numerous cross-currents ... and an unflinching desire to create on film an image that can be viewed as an independent and provocative art.... The goal [of this set] is to present the broadest possible spectrum of experimental films produced between the 1890s and 1940s."

Each of the seven discs is organized around a central theme, and which one you first reach for will be determined by individual curiosity and susceptibility. *The Devil's Plaything: American Surrealism* steps off with Edwin S. Porter's 1902 *Jack and the Beanstalk*, its visionary transformations of settings and now-you-see-'em, now-you-don't appearances and disappearances of cast members the more remarkable for having been entirely achieved in the shooting, without postproduction optical trickery. Griffith's cameraman-to-be Billy Bitzer sends time scurrying dreamily backwards in *Impossible Convicts* (1905), while such classic 1920s experiments as *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Telltale Heart* seek to meet Edgar Allan Poe halfway by portraying distorted/demented worlds via stylized lighting and decor. The ambitious Robert Florey, whose feature-directing career would be almost entirely confined to the B zone, collaborates with montage maestro Slavko Vorkapich on *The Life and Death of 9413--A Hollywood Extra* and with premier production designer William Cameron Menzies on *The Love of Zero*.

Inverted Narratives: New Directions in Storytelling includes *Suspense*, a 1913 two-reeler by Lois Weber that emulates and occasionally tops her august contemporary, D.W. Griffith; the adventurous selection of camera angles and big, then still-bigger closeups continue to amaze. Charles Vidor's *The Bridge*, a 1929 rendering of the Ambrose Bierce story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," is starker than but not inferior to the more poetic French version that won an Oscar in the 1960s. Josef Berne's *Black Dawn*, aka *Dawn After Dawn*, weaves a Gothic spell with its account of love and death on an isolated farm, including a startling passage of sunstruck eroticism. And twelve minutes of Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand's agitprop, allegorical docudrama of American corporate fascism *Native Land*, narrated by Paul Robeson, inspires an urgent wish to see the entire film.

Light Rhythms: Music and Abstraction moves from surrealist milestones such as Man Ray's *Le Retour à la raison*, Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique*, and Rose Sélavý's *Anémic cinéma* (an anagram many times over) to never-seen full-length versions of montages created by Slavko Vorkapich for such films as *Crime Without Passion* and *The Firefly*. Vorkapich's mesmerizing nature poem *Moods of the Sea*, set to Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave*, is among the most relentlessly stunning passages on celluloid. An ecstatically extended *bal* sequence from Ernst Lubitsch's *So This Is Paris* inspires, again, a craving to see that unavailable 1926 feature film, while George L.K. Morris' *Abstract Movies* is an encyclopedic and hilarious amateur re-creation of fond clichés and tropes of generic filmmaking.

Still, if one had to pick a single DVD to luxuriate in (and one can: it's the only disc available separately), it would have to be *Picturing a Metropolis: New York City Unveiled*. *The Blizzard*, a Gotham panorama grabbed by an unknown cameraman standing outside the Mutoscope film company office one day in 1898, is one of the most enchanting moments you'll ever experience on film, with an urban crowd sharing the bemusement of a winter day slipping into evening, and the fairy-tale vastness of a nearby park softened by falling snow: an absentminded documentary record become sheer poetry. Bitzer's *Interior New York Subway, 14th Street to 42nd Street*, an unbroken take from the front of an onrushing train (with supplementary illumination supplied by lights mounted on another train on a parallel track!), was shot in 1905, though the itinerary looks exactly the same today; only the crowds have changed. (One comical, endearing touch: a mother and her children, caught in passing at Grand Central, stop in their bustling journey to stare at the camera.) The 1901 *Demolishing and Building Up the Star Theatre* uses time-lapse photography to chronicle the taking down, and then to imaginatively ordain the resurrection, of an urban show palace. And Robert Flaherty's *24 Dollar Island* (c. 1926) is so razor-sharp and judiciously observed that it remains the definitive portrait of Manhattan on film--truly a portrait of the city itself as a living, dynamic space, with scarcely any intrusion of humankind to distract us from the place, its light and shapes and rhythms.

There's additional, virtually prehistoric contemplation of urban spaces--including the 1900 Paris Exposition and the Eiffel Tower--in *The Mechanized Eye: Experiments in Technique and Form*. *The Amateur as Auteur: Discovering Paradise in Pictures* celebrates the intentional and inadvertent sublimities of home movies. And *Viva la Dance: The Beginnings of Ciné-Dance* collects everything from the various *Annabelle Dances* of 1894-97 through Mexican footage shot for Sergei Eisenstein's *Que viva México* to one more bravura sequence by Busby Berkeley (from *Wonder Bar*) and the avowedly avant-garde *Tarantella* and *Spook Sport* by Mary Ellen Bute in 1940.

It cannot be overstated that much of this footage is beautifully preserved, whether transferred from paper prints or exhumed from still-luminous nitrate footage cached in a European archive. And the brief headnotes by such authoritative commentators as Jan-Christian Horak, David Shepard, Kevin Brownlow, and Bruce Posner himself are marvels of lucidity and concision, supplying just the right context--in a mere 50 words or so--to enable the uninitiated viewer to appreciate the film he or she is about to witness. *Unseen Cinema* is not just (*just!*) an awesome collection of film landmarks--it's a landmark achievement in its own right. --Richard T. Jameson