

## Screenings: Unseen Cinema

Review by Brian Frye

If a student's seen any American avant-garde film, odds are it's Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's *Meshes of the Afternoon*. That's because conventional wisdom says the contemporary American avant-garde starts with Deren. Bruce Posner, the iconoclastic curator of "Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894-1941," disagrees. According to Posner, the American avant-garde begins with Edison—the original innovator—and continues straight on through to today. To back up his argument, he assembled a touring collection of films acquired from the British Film Institute, George Eastman House, Deutsches Filmmuseum, the Library of Congress, the Museum of Modern Art, Anthology Film Archives, and an assortment of regional film archives.

When Posner premiered his retrospective in 2001, it stirred up quite a tempest in the hermetic world of the avant-garde. But whether or not enthusiasts bought his thesis, they went to the programs. Now, Posner and producer David Shepard have transformed the project into a seven-dvd box set that is the must-have release of the year for any serious collector. The *Unseen Cinema* dvds present a decidedly eclectic collection of short films, sorted into seven broad themes: The Mechanized Eye, The Devil's Plaything, Light Rhythms, Inverted Narratives, Picturing a Metropolis, The Amateur as Auteur, and Viva la Dance. Each disc purports to define a sub-genre and trace its development.

And yet, Posner's historical argument is, frankly, unconvincing—largely because it's essentially semantic. Basically, he redefines "avant-garde" as "innovative"—and then proclaims every technically or aesthetically innovative prewar film he can find part of the American avant-garde. That's fine, as far as it goes. But it's also uncontroversial. No one actually believes innovation and experimentation started with Deren. "American avant-garde film" describes a genre, not a set of formal qualities. So the interesting question is whether the postwar avant-garde borrowed from the prewar experimenters or broke with them. The answer looks to be a touch of the former, but mostly the latter.

In any case, it's hard to credit a theory that places Thomas Edison, D.W. Griffith, Jay Leyda, Orson Welles, Man Ray, Busby Berkeley, and Joseph Cornell in the same aesthetic tradition. Even a casual viewer will find Posner's argument implausible. Still, he does have a point. Surely, the postwar avant-garde was at least aware of its past. A few filmmakers—notably Cornell and Rudy Burckhardt—even weathered the transition. But Posner's illustrations obscure and even frustrate his argument. Every film he chooses is interesting, and many are truly great. But it's obvious that the prewar avant-garde he documents identified with Hollywood, and the postwar avant-garde identified with the art world. And that's a fundamental difference.

But really, who cares? You don't have to buy Posner's theory of the avant-garde to love the movies he's collected. And *Unseen Cinema* is packed with 155 fantastically obscure, astonishingly beautiful, and historically significant films that are difficult or impossible to see anywhere else. That's reason enough to recommend the collection right there.

A few obscure films by famous directors jump out, like Orson Welles's *The Hearts of Age* (34) and Robert Florey's *The Love of Zero* (28). But *Unseen Cinema* makes its most significant contribution by collecting the films of little-known outsiders like James Sibley Watson, Melville Webber, Slavko Vorkapich, Ralph Steiner, Mary Ellen Bute, and so on. It adds some of the most unusual of the first Edison and Porter experiments, then continues with charming early home movies. It then caps things off with truly brilliant films by Cornell, Burckhardt, Lewis Jacobs, Steiner, Douglas Crockwell, and others.

The Cornell films are especially welcome. Best known for his intricate sculptural boxes, Cornell is among Posner's best examples of a prewar filmmaker who had an immense influence on the postwar avant-garde. Posner's done an immense service by making films like Cornell's *Children's Party* (38), *Cotillion* (38), and *The Midnight Party* (38) readily available. Not to mention little-known rarities like *Thimble Theater* (38) and other Cornell shorts, only recently discovered by researchers at Anthology Film Archives.

In truth, it is an avant-gardist's wish list. The image is top quality, transferred from exceptionally good prints. While some of the films are still marred by scratches, missing frames, and so on, existing prints are generally much worse, if available at all. The budget-minded can purchase *Picturing a Metropolis*, focusing on New York City, the only disc available on its own. It's a treasure, featuring ebullient primitive films from the Gilded Age and Progressive Era gems by Paul Strand, Robert Flaherty, and Leyda. But the entire collection is well worth the price.