THE NEW REPUBLIC ONLINE

issue date: June 26, 2006

JED PERL ON ART
Peep Shows for Poets

While technophiles are often far too quick to assume that heightened access equals heightened understanding, access is surely one of the conditions for understanding. Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894-1941, a magnificent set of seven DVDs recently issued by Anthology Film Archives, the temple of avant-garde cinema in New York's East Village, will provide the raw materials for many a do-it-yourself revaluation of the history of experimentation in the movies. Some hand-colored footage of a "Butterfly Dance" performed by Annabelle Moore, whose billowing costume is maneuvered to create delicious Art Nouveau patterns, suggests a startling prefiguring of the blots and blurs of color in Blake's film, although I have no reason to believe that Blake was thinking of this footage--or of the more famous films of Loie Fuller performing similar dances in fin-de-siècle Paris.

Unseen Cinema, which was organized by Bruce Posner and runs to some nineteen hours, is an astonishing achievement. The DVDs are presented thematically, although some of the themes are so capacious as to confound their own titles. The most sharply focused, Picturing a Metropolis: New York City Unveiled, moves from early footage of the city, including the Edison Company's heart-stoppingly poetic Coney Island at Night to Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's well-known Manhatta, to some work by Rudy Burckhardt, the film-maker, photographer, and painter who was also one of de Kooning's earliest friends in New York. Viva La Dance: The Beginnings of Ciné-Dance is more variegated but still clearly delimited, opening with Annabelle Moore's "Butterfly Dance" and bringing, near its end, David Bradley's Peer Gynt of 1941, starring a teenage Charlton Heston.

What is evident in these selections--and only becomes clearer in the omnium-gatherum DVDs devoted to "new directions in storytelling," "music and abstraction," and "experiments in technique and form"--is how fluid the definition of avant-garde film turns out to be, at least according to the curators at Anthology Film Archives. Suspense--a 1913 melodrama in which a housewife and her baby are nearly attacked by a knife-wielding drifter--is included because of its split-screen techniques, but if this silent prefigures a certain kind of art film, it is also a potboiler with a place in the prehistory of the psycho-thrillers we all see at the multiplex. Unseen Cinema is a gloriously messy affair, in which Busby Berkeley, everybody's hero of Hollywood high camp, can rub shoulders with an abstract movie by the utterly highbrow geometric painter and Partisan Review editor George L. K. Morris.

The inclusion in Unseen Cinema of work by the Edison Company and D.W. Griffith and a host of other people who have secure places in the standard histories of Hollywood suggests that film, a radically new medium around 1900, was once inherently avant-garde. And there is an even larger conclusion that some may want to draw from this anthology, which is that those who explore the possibilities of the moving image are by the very nature of their work members of a permanent avant-garde. Certainly the old idea that avant-gardism is essentially anti-commercial does not make much sense in this context. And if the early Edison films of Coney Island are indeed avant-garde, it is an avant-gardism that depends not on a revaluation of tradition (which most commentators would say is the essence of the thing) but simply on the fundamentalism of the visual impressions, the almost unconscious freshness of the imagery.