Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894–1941

CURATED BY BRUCE POSNER; PRODUCED FOR DVD BY DAVID SHEPARD.
DISTRIBUTED BY IMAGE ENTERTAINMENT AND ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES, 2005.

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With 155 films on seven DVDs and a total running time of just under nineteen hours, *Unseen Cinema* represents a major effort to present, in the words of its curator, Bruce Posner, "the broadest possible spectrum of experimental films produced between the 1890s and 1940s."[1] Thus Posner joins Jan-Christopher Horak and the contributors to his anthology *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945* in an effort to open the canon of American experimental/avant-garde film to work made before 1943, when Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid made *Meshes of the Afternoon*–"the quasi-official inauguration of the American avant-garde"[2] and starting point for P. Adams Sitney's extremely influential study of American avant-garde film, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000.* By making these films available for multiple viewings, *Unseen Cinema* contributes significantly to the study and enjoyment of what Horak calls the "first avant-garde" in American cinema.[3]

Information preceding each film includes its source, the title, date, director(s), musicians (for the silent films), or, when relevant, the title of the composition heard on the soundtrack. Brief notes introduce most of the films, and among extra features (accessible on a computer's DVD-ROM drive) is information on the authors of the film notes and the musicians who provided accompaniment for the silent films. Most useful of all is a "Bios" section with information on "filmmakers, artists, musicians, and related individuals and groups active in experimental cinema between 1894 and 1941." Many entries include photographs; there are also examples of artwork, frame enlargements, and other relevant visual material. The list is organized alphabetically, but there is no way to call up a name directly; you must find it by scrolling through its 253 "pages" or by selecting the number of a "page" and hoping you land close to the one you are seeking.

The visual quality of the films varies considerably, but all were, according to Posner, "digitally mastered from newly preserved and restored 35mm and 16mm prints," and a note on the DVD box promises, "Films are presented in their original 1.33:1 aspect ratio." Presumably that is how they can be seen when properly projected, but on my TV screen the full frame is not visible. This is especially annoying when viewing films with the most carefully composed images and films with abstract, geometrical patterns. Nevertheless, given the challenges involved in collecting and making presentable prints for *Unseen Cinema,* Posner and DVD producer David Shepard have done a commendable job.

Sound quality also varies. As one would expect, the early sound films tend to have rather thin, tinny soundtracks. The quality of the sound

added to the silent films is good; the music itself ranges from imaginative to cliché and banal. In a few instances, a new recording of the original music was made for the print in the collection. A few films are "intentionally silent." A special case is Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924). With the aid of computers, player pianos, live performances, synthesizers, and samples of sound effects, Paul D. Lehrman, a composer and expert in music technology at Tufts University, created a shortened version of Georges Antheil's *Ballet mécanique* for the soundtrack of a good quality, partially tinted print of the film.[4] The result is the collection's *pièce de résistance* as far as the use of sound is concerned.

The films on each disk appear in roughly chronological order and are nominally illustrative of a particular subject, theme, or set of formal devices. I say "nominally" because the relevance of some films to the organizing principle of the disk in which they appear is tenuous at best. While this dilutes the conceptual and aesthetic impact of the disk, it allows Posner to include a number of interesting films that might otherwise have remained "unseen."

It must be said, however, that "unseen" is a misnomer for a sizable number of the films, including some that have been—and in some cases, still are—widely seen. Millions of ordinary moviegoers have seen the three Busby Berkley sequences included in *Unseen Cinema,* and nearly as many would have seen the samples of Slavo Vorkapich's montage sequences for Hollywood films and trailers. The very early "views" shot at the Paris Exposition of 1900 and in various locations in New York City between 1899 and 1905 were popular entertainment at the time, as were, in a different era, Norman McLaren's drawn-on-film animations *Spook Sport* (in collaboration with Mary Ellen Bute, 1939) and *Stars and Stripes* (1940), both of which were shown in cinemas across the United States, and *Valentine Greeting* (1939–40), which was broadcast on NBC Television. Paul Burnford's *Storm* (1942–43) was made for John Nesbitt's popular *Passing Parade* series produced by MGM. Oscar Fischinger's *An Optical Poem* (1938), as Cecile Starr notes, "was shown nationwide in movie houses as a short subject in Technicolor," and Mary Ellen Bute, Ted Nemeth, and Melville Webber's *Rhythm in Light* (1934) "played at New York's Radio City Music Hall, the world's largest and most prestigious motion picture show case."[5]

Many other films ran in cinemas devoted to experimental and "artistic" American and European films.[6] Some were also screened by film societies, art galleries, and amateur film clubs. Moreover, audiences for avant-garde film, including students in film studies courses, have had many opportunities to see *Ballet méchanique* (though not with the Anthiel score), Man Ray's *Retour à la raison* (1923), and Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic cinéma* (1924–26).[7] Among other avant-garde films in *Unseen Cinema* that have remained in the realm of the easily seeable are Robert Florey and Slavo Vorkapich's *The Life and Death of 9413–A Hollywood Extra* (1927), James Sibley Watson Jr. and Melville Webber's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1926–28), Ralph Steiner's H_2O (1929), Oscar Fischinger's abstract films, and Joseph Cornell's found-footage films. The list could be extended, but my point is that while these and many other films in the collection deserve to be seen again, to label them "unseen" misrepresents their place in the developments and dynamics of film distribution and reception from the 1920s to the present.

A more troubling misrepresentation is the implication that all of the films in *Unseen Cinema* are "avant-garde." To do so is to drain that term of all practical, theoretical, and historical meaning. A significant number of the films were made during the first two decades of cinema's existence, before a set of cinematic forms and conventions—against which an avant-garde could rebel—were in place. As Kristin Thompson writes, "it is only after the formulation of classical Hollywood norms was well advanced that we can speak of an avant-garde alternative."[8] Moreover, most of the early films were part of what constituted commercial cinema at the time. While nearly all of the later films in the collection avoid the formulas of classical Hollywood cinema, many display little, if any, of the iconoclastic, rule-breaking approaches to cinematic expression that one expects of avant-garde films. Consequently, in the following, necessarily cursory, survey of the contents of *Unseen Cinema,* I will concentrate on the works that, in my view, belong most clearly in the avant-garde tradition.

Disk 1, "The Mechanized Eye: Experiments in Technology and Form," begins with nine films shot between 1900 and 1904 illustrating early uses of camera movement and special effects. The first film with something like artistic, avant-garde intentions is *In Youth, Beside the Lonely Sea* (c. 1924–25, creators unknown), a poetry-film in a triptych format with some use of superimposition. Of the remaining eight films, two belong in the ranks of (virtually) unseen American avant-garde film: Emlen Etting's *Poem 8* (1932–33), in which a subjective camera interacts with several different women in different locations and ends up participating in the murder (whether imagined or real in diegetic terms remains ambiguous) of a woman who flagrantly flirts with the camera(man), and Henwar Rodakiewicz's *Portrait of a Young Man* (1925–31), a beautifully photographed montage film expressing the frame of mind of "a young man" who never appears in the film.

In Disk 2, "The Devil's Plaything: American Surrealism," the only films that might be deemed surrealist are five of Joseph Cornell's found-footage films. The set includes early trick films and dream sequences—the well-known *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (Edwin S. Porter, 1906) and dream sequences from two Hollywood films: *When the Clouds Roll By* (Douglas Fairbanks and Victor Fleming, 1919) and *Beggar on Horseback* (James Cruze, 1925). The latter, according to Kristin Thompson, "was widely seen as the first major Hollywood film influenced by German Expressionism."[9] Other versions of domesticated expressionism are *The Fall of the House of Usher, The Life and Death of 9413,* and the less familiar *The Love of Zero* (Robert Florey and William Cameron Menzies, 1928). An interesting curiosity is Orson Welles's first film, *The Hearts of Age* (William Vance and Orson Welles, 1934), a short in which Welles, in heavy makeup, plays a dapper, grotesquely grinning old man representing Death.[10]

With Disk 3, "Light Rhythms: Music and Abstraction," the avant-garde quotient increases considerably, beginning with *La Retour à la raison, Ballet mécanique,* and *Anémic cinéma.* Also included are Alexandre Alexeieff and Claire Parker's *Night on Bald Mountain* (1934), a rather soft-focused and murky print that mutes the eerie effect of Alexeieff and Parker's pin screen animation. There are good prints of Steiner's H_2O and his less well known (and less effective) *Surf and Seaweed* (1930). The former is not improved by the addition of an innocuous piano accompaniment, and the music added to the latter becomes downright irritating (MoMA's prints of the films are silent which, presumably, is how Steiner wanted them). Much stronger than *Surf and Seaweed* is *Moods of the Sea* (Slavo Vorkapich and John Hoffman, 1941). The quality of the print is excellent. Its montage of waves, seaside cliffs, clouds, sea birds, and seals is tight and expressive (thanks, no doubt, to Vorkapich), and its visual rhythms suit the accompanying orchestral music from Mendelssohn's "Fingal's Cave."

Of the twelve films on this disk that are semi- or completely abstract, the following seem to me most noteworthy. In Francis Bruguière's *Light Rhythms* (1930) superimposed images of lights moving over paper folded into abstract shapes create intricate patterns of light and shadow. Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth's *Synchromy No. 2* is an example of their long-term efforts to "visualize" music in abstract film forms, what an opening title calls "A Seeing Sound Film." Francis Lee's *1941* (1941), an emotionally charged and unambiguously symbolic work (Horak calls it "an animated action painting")[11] expresses Lee's reaction to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Douglass Crockwell's *Glens Falls Sequence* (1937–46) contains many fascinating images—especially those produced by animated finger painting and wet paint squeezed between layers of glass—but it is more like a series of studies than a unified work. Dwinell Grant's *Composition No. 1: Themis* (1940) and *Composition No. 2: Contrathemis* (1941) achieve the unity Crockwell's film lacks through careful integration of animated lines, simple, cut-out geometric shapes, and glowing, colored backgrounds. Though the abstract style is dated, the films hold up well because of Grant's success at adapting painterly techniques to the rhythms of cinema.

Avant-garde film is notably resistant to narrative. Consequently, Disk 4, "Inverted Narratives: New Directions in Storytelling," will receive short shrift here. Some "avant-garde" special effects accompany the hallucinations of a young serving woman in *Lullaby* (Boris Deutsch, 1929). In *Even as You and I* (Roger

Barlow, Harry Hoy, and Le Roy Robbins, 1937), three amateur filmmakers make an ersatz surrealist film. *Object Lesson* (Christopher Young, 1941) is closer to the real thing — surrealistic, with possible symbolic or allegorical significance, and a montage of industrial sound effects and extracts from several different types of music on the soundtrack.

Disk 5, "Picturing a Metropolis: New York City Unveiled," begins with six "views" of the city shot between 1899 and 1905, followed by four other early films that anticipate techniques taken up in later years by avant-garde filmmakers. In *Demolishing and Building up the Star Theatre* (Frederick S. Armstrong, 1901), a time-lapse record of the demolition runs in reverse, so that the building rises phoenix-like from its own rubble and then is reduced to rubble again. Another time-lapse film by Armstrong, *Seeing New York by Yacht* (1902), views Manhattan from a moving boat and, as Posner explains in the note introducing the film, "the time-lapse mechanism misregistered creating a fuzzy impressionistic effect." *Coney Island at Night* (Edwin S. Porter, 1905) captures the spectacle of the entertainment park's myriad lights at night. *Interior New York Subway, 14th Street to 42nd Street* (G. W. "Billy" Bitzer, 1905) takes the shape of a 1970s "structural" film, with a fixed view of the tunnel ahead and the periodic appearance of stations serving as spatial-temporal markers along the train's trajectory. A "Grand Central" sign visible on the platform at the last stop provides formal closure.

Most of the other films with a claim to avant-garde credentials fall within the category of "city symphonies." Heading the list is Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921), followed by much more accomplished films by Robert Flaherty, *24 Dollar Island* (c. 1926), and Robert Florey, *Skyscraper Symphony* (1929). Bonney Powell's dawn-to-dusk celebration of New York's street life, *Manhattan Melody* (1931), contains cautious versions of the shooting and editing techniques of Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera.* One of the highlights of this disk is Jay Leyda's *A Bronx Morning* (1931), an intimate, artfully filmed and edited evocation of everyday life in a predominately working class borough of New York. Depression-era poverty receives more emphasis in Lewis Jacobs's *Footnote to Fact* (1933), a film that was believed lost until the original negative turned up at Anthology Film Archives in the 1990s. Rudy Burchardt's *Seeing the World–Part One: A Visit to New York, N.Y.* (1937), with an (intentionally?) insipid narration, is less interesting than his *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1940), which opens with a montage of walking feet and plunges ahead with many different shots of the city and varying shooting speeds, freeze frames, upside-down shots, and superimpositions. Oddly, the overall effect is rather bland. The disk ends with Herman G. Weinberg's *Autumn Fire* (1930–33), a romantic tale told through crosscutting between the bucolic countryside and imposing cityscapes. The latter footage apparently comes from Weinberg's lost film, *A City Symphony* (c. 1930). The film rewards careful viewing, as is indicated by Robert Haller's observation, "One of the most affecting shots in the film (affecting because it seems to meditate on film as film) comes when Weinberg pauses upon an image of a revolving door, which spins before the camera, letting light in and blocking it, like a shutter on a movie projector."[12] Posner's unfortunate decision to add musical accompaniment to this originally silent film makes it harder to notice such subtle touches.

Disk 6, "The Amateur as Auteur: Discovering Paradise in Pictures," mixes home movies (including a beautiful, sensitively filmed evocation of rural New England life, *Windy Ledge Farm* [Elizabeth Woodman Wright, c. 1929–34]) with well-made, but hardly groundbreaking, amateur films by Rudy Burckhardt, Lewis Jacobs, and Frank Stauffacher. Of the set's eighteen films, four qualify for avant-garde status. Three make up Joseph Cornell's "Children's Trilogy" (c. 1938), composed of found footage from home movies of a children's party and documentaries of performing animals and a knife-throwing act. Of these, *Children's Party* is a tiny masterpiece. The fourth is *1126 Dewey Ave., Apt. 207* (creators unknown, 1939), an enigmatic exploration of an apartment in which a woman is sometimes present. Its disquieting atmosphere anticipates the more dramatic treatment of rooms and inanimate objects in *Meshes of the Afternoon.*

The contents of Disk 7, "Viva la Dance: The Beginnings of Ciné-Dance," are extremely diverse.[13] Short, tinted films show Annabelle Whitford Moore and Crissie Sheridan performing their popular "butterfly" and "serpentine"

dances (W. K. L. Dickson and others, 1894–97). A Busby Berkeley dance sequence from *Wonder Bar* (1934) is pure Hollywood spectacle.[14] Much more in the avant-garde spirit is *Hands: The Life and Loves of the Gentler Sex* (Stella Simon and Miklós Bándy, 1927–28), a three-part "ballet" for hands filmed in abstract, cubistic settings.[15] Much less avant-garde is *Tilly Losch in Her Dance of the Hands* (Norman Bel Geddes, c. 1930–33), in which, by the end, we see all of the famous Broadway performer, not just her hands. Dudley Murphy's *The Soul of the Cypress* (1920) and Emlen Etting's *Oramunde* (1933) feature a woman posing, walking, and making some dance-like movements in picturesque settings along the California coast. Animated abstract shapes "dance" in Oscar Fischinger's *An Optical Poem,* in Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth's *Dada* (1936) and *Synchrony No. 4: Escape* (1938), and in two films by Bute, Nemeth, and Norman McLaren, *Spook Sport* and *Tarantella* (1940). Close-ups of moving machine parts create a fascinating, if disjointed, mechanical dance in Ralph Steiner's *Mechanical Principles* (1930). In *Introspection* (1941–46), Sara Kathryn Arledge uses slow motion, unusual camera angles, positive and negative images, superimposition—frequently with its "layers" in different colors—and shots of two male dancers to create a truly cinematic choreography. Titles at the beginning modestly, but accurately, describe the film as "a series of experiments" and "fragments of dancer imagery." Unfortunately, Arledge never completed a formally unified avant-garde dance film. That would be left to "second generation" American avant-garde filmmakers like Maya Deren, Ed Emshwiller, and Hillary Harris, who, knowingly or not, followed in her footsteps.

Thanks to *Unseen Cinema,* it is no longer possible *not* to know what American avant-garde filmmakers attempted—and accomplished—before 1943.

NOTES

1. Bruce Posner, *Where the Buffalo Roamed: Relative Histories of an Early American Avant-Garde Film* (insert with *Unseen Cinema*), n.p.
2. Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xv.
3. For comparisons of the "first" and "second" avant-gardes see Jan-Christopher Horak, "The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945," in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945,* ed. Horak, 14–66 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).
4. A detailed account of the production of the sound track appears in Paul D. Lehrman, "Music for *Ballet mécanique* : 90s Technology Realizes a 20s Vision," in *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film, 1893–1941,* ed. Bruce Posner, 70–74 (New York: Black Thistle Press/Anthology Film Archives, 2001). This catalog for the traveling retrospective of the same name, which opened at Anthology Film Archives in 2001, includes a number of articles relevant to the DVD collection as well as a list of the programs and individual films in the retrospective. (In subsequent references, this source will be listed as *Unseen Cinema.*)
5. Cecile Starr, "Busby Berkeley and America's Pioneer Abstract Filmmakers," in *Unseen Cinema,* 78.
6. For a brief chronicle of the proliferation of "little cinemas" in American cities during the 1920s, see Horak, "The First American Film Avant-Garde," 20–25.
7. The justification for including these three made-in-France staples of the first European avant-garde is that Americans were instrumental in their production: Dudley Murphy and Man Ray for *Ballet mécanique;* Man Ray for his film *Retour à la raison* and as the cinematographer of *Anémic cinéma.* For an extensive discussion of Murphy's and Man Ray's involvement in the production of these films, see William Moritz, "Americans in Paris: Man Ray and Dudley Murphy," in *Lovers of Cinema,* 118–36.
8. Kristin Thompson, "The Limits of Experimentation in Hollywood," in *Lovers of Cinema,* 68.
9. Ibid., 84–85.
10. For Welles's dismissive comments on the film (including his rejection of the notion that it was surrealist), see "My First Movie and *The Hearts of Age:* Orson Welles Interviewed by Peter Bogdanovich," in *Unseen Cinema,* 141.
11. Horak, "The First American Film Avant-Garde," 40.
12. Robert Haller, "Herman G. Weinberg: *Autumn Fire,*" in *Unseen Cinema,* 138.
13. The polyglot main title of this disk may sound good, but its mix of Italian ("viva"), French or Italian ("la"), and English ("dance") has nothing to do with the all-American contents of the disk itself.
14. The other Busby Berkeley sequences in *Unseen Cinema* are from *Footlight Parade* (1933) on disk 3 and *Gold Diggers of 1935* (1935) on disk 5.
15. The original title of the film is *Hände: Des Leben und die Liebe eines Zärtichen Geschlechts.* As the title suggests, the film was made in Germany. Simon was an American who moved to Berlin in the mid-1920s to study at the Technische Hochschule, where the film was made (Horak, "The First American Film Avant-Garde," 43).