

## 'Unseen Cinema' a trove of ideas

By Gary Arnold

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If you can afford to splurge this holiday season while shopping for a dyed-in-the-wool movie nut whose tastes are not strictly mainstream, the most generous purchase might be the DVD collection "Unseen Cinema."

Culled from about 60 movie archives around the world, it offers about 155 titles, mostly shorts, that illustrate experimental and abstract filmmaking in the United States over half a century, from the dawn of movie production to the early 1940s.

The subtitle sets the boundaries: "Early American Avant-Garde Film, 1894-1941." A similar anthology, Kino Video's "Avant-Garde: Films From the Raymond Rohauer Collection," was released a few months ago. A two-disc set, it consists of about two dozen titles -- most European in origin and all from a single source.

At a glance, "Unseen Cinema" has this forerunner decisively outgunned. It boasts five more discs and about 130 more selections. The category "American Avant-Garde" is also roomy. It includes numerous emigre filmmakers who ended up living and working in the United States at one time or another.

Judging from a preview sampler that includes two pictures common to both collections -- the documentary tone poem "Manhatta," made in 1921, and the cubist caprice "Ballet Mechnique" (from 1924) -- "Unseen's" curators, Bruce Posner and David Shepard, may have enjoyed access to the superior archive copies. In the case of "Ballet Mechnique," a collaboration between Fernand Leger, Dudley Murphy and George Antheil, they also have been able to restore Mr. Antheil's original orchestral accompaniment for the first showing in Vienna.

This cacophonous composition proved difficult to synchronize for a long time. The orchestration is proudly eccentric. Heavy on player pianos and percussion, the score at one point also calls for an airplane propeller. The movie's imagery seems to scamper and cascade more effectively if the volume is moderate to low. On high, you can get the impression that Mr. Antheil is determined to upstage, even smack down, his collaborators.

A newly commissioned and lovely score for "Manhatta" by Donald Sosin accompanies the film in both collections. About two-thirds of the films in "Unseen Cinema" were silent. Unless the curators knew for a fact that music was anathema to the filmmakers, scores enhance their substantial silent inventory.

Each disc is freighted with a theme: "The Mechanized Eye: Experiments in Technique and Form"; "The Devil's Plaything: American Surrealism"; "Light Rhythms: Music and Abstraction"; "Inverted Narratives: New Directions in Storytelling"; "Picturing a Metropolis: New York City Unveiled"; "The Amateur as Auteur: Discovering Paradise in Pictures"; "Viva La Dance: The Beginnings of Cine-Dance."

The sampler suggests that arbitrary sorting will be a constant. "Ballet Mechnique," for example, would seem a natural for "Mechanized Eye"; it's full of shots of mechanical objects in motion, and it's self-evidently an experiment in technique and form. Nevertheless, the film has been reserved for "Light Rhythms," perhaps because the Antheil score is back in force.

The vast majority of selections might qualify as American surrealism or amateur auteurism. The only example of "inverted narrative" in the sampler is seven minutes from "Native Land," the Leo Hurwitz-Paul Strand propaganda relic of the late 1930s. In this case, the "new direction in storytelling" is a stilted dead-end leftist special pleading and caricature in which documentary glimpses of labor marches and riots fail to harmonize

with stiffly dramatized vignettes.

The dance and New York categories look most promising in the preview disc. The first selection, "Annabel Dances and Dances," is probably somewhat familiar to everyone who has seen an evocation of early film history.

Made for the Edison Studio in 1896, it observes solo dance performances by an Annabel and a Crissie (last names Moore and Sheridan, respectively). Their footwork is less conspicuous than their arm work. Capacious, winglike costumes threaten to enfold and engulf the dancers during much of their exertion, but they remain skillfully upright while simulating the movement of butterflies and perhaps time-lapse flowers. Hand tinting enhances most of the footage, and it's particularly striking when the hues resemble orchids in bloom.

A different approach to dance is exemplified in "Spook Sport," an animated collaboration of 1939-40 between Mary Ellen Bute; her husband, Theodore Nemeth; and the revered Norman McLaren -- whose specialty became drawing directly on celluloid.

This forgotten Halloween treat, presumably one of the Bute-Nemeth shorts that used to be on the bill at Radio City Music Hall, animates amiably ghostly shapes to the score of Camille Saint-Saens' "Danse Macabre." Walt Disney would have been well-advised to snap it up for "Fantasia," which still could use a blithe eight minutes somewhere in its ungainly continuity.

"Unseen Cinema" appears to be promising a number of rediscoveries from the vintage-film-society catalogs, such as Miss Bute and Mr. McLaren, whose work richly deserves a DVD generation of admirers. An excerpt from James Cruze's 1924 movie version of "Beggar on Horseback" -- a giddy dream sequence with Edward Everett Horton as a bridegroom that fits into the "surrealism" basket -- suggests that a Cruze tribute might be a little overdue on Turner Classic Movies. Paramount seems to have supplied the curators with an impeccable print, and the sequence certainly makes an amusing teaser for the movie as a whole.

**TITLE:** "Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film, 1894-1941"

**CONTENT:** Seven-disc anthology of abstract and experimental movies

**RUNNING TIME:** About 19 hours

**RATING:** Unrated

**PRICE:** \$100

**DISTRIBUTOR:** Image Entertainment

**WEB SITE:** [www.unseen-cinema.com](http://www.unseen-cinema.com)