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Seeing Is Believing:

Unseen Cinema unearths a new history of the early American avant-garde

by Steve Anderson

The most interesting histories are those which dispute prevailing narratives or reclaim a past that is in danger of being lost. Indeed, the essence of historiography is discursive and cultural struggle – the preservation, revision and contestation of a consequential past – not the accumulation of polite footnotes in academic volumes. *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893-1941*, a joint project of Anthology Film Archives and the Deutsches Filmmuseum in Frankfurt, offers one such undertaking. Curated by Bruce Posner, the traveling program of films – a staggering 22 hours' worth – is a rare attempt at both historical revision and preservation, and if things go well, one which is likely to provoke both controversy and interest in a long-neglected corner of film history.

When Bruce Posner began seriously pursuing the idea of restoring and programming a 16-part series of films which contradicted the canonical history of pre-WWII American avant-garde cinema, not everyone was enthusiastic about the idea. According to Posner, people's first response inevitably came down to "who are these guys and who are they kidding? This is a major financial undertaking in an area of film that nobody cares about!" To make matters worse, the conventional history of avant-garde cinema maintains that there was only "scattered" avant-garde activity in the U.S. prior to 1943, when Maya Deren made her celebrated film-poem, *Meshes of the Afternoon*.

The films that Posner wanted to show were not merely obscure or forgotten – though many were both – they were films that couldn't be accounted for by conventional histories; films that, in some cases, shouldn't have even existed. History is always ready to accommodate new pieces of familiar puzzles – a missing reel salvaged from a dusty corner of the archive, a shooting script with handwritten notes by the director – just as long as they support the logic of chronological progression from past to present.

But what are we to make of films that radically disrupt accepted timelines and comfortable historical narratives? What about films which demonstrate styles, techniques or concerns that are not supposed to have been invented (or imported) until years or decades later? How can we account for what appears to be a Structural film that was made in the 1920s, for example, or a Hollywood director who uses the industry for personal experimentation? It is just these types of aberrations – exceptions to the rule, anachronisms, and stylistic corruscations – that form the heart of *Unseen Cinema*.

Historical Revision

Conventional wisdom and the prevailing historical narrative, articulated most influentially by P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, hold that avant-garde cinema was essentially transplanted from Europe to the United States during the 1940s. Films from the French Surrealist movement such as Louis Bunuel and Salvador Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* constituted an ur-text for a whole generation of avant-garde filmmakers in the United States. According to film historian and archivist at the Library of Congress, Brian Taves, "For years, the New

York elite that did so much to create the post-war movement also wrote the history, and they left out their predecessors...It was up to scholars to challenge the conventional wisdom propagated by filmmakers themselves."

A substantial challenge to Sitney's premise came with the publication in 1995 of Jan-Christopher Horak's *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945*. According to avant-garde historian and USC Professor, David James, "Sitney's great work [in *Visionary Film*] was oriented by a New York perspective, so that what he called the 'visionary tradition' in the American avant-garde was seen as both re-mobilizing the dialectics of Romantic poetry and paralleling the migration of the Parisian school of Modernist painting to New York. The framing and conceptual foundation of his work, in that particular project at least, turned his attention away from the experimental filmmaking that had happened in the United States in the 1920s and 30s. The intervention of Horak's book was an attempt to create a different genealogy for the post-war American avant-garde."

The genealogy created by Horak and the other contributors to *Lovers of Cinema* sought to recuperate a range of previously unknown or unappreciated films into the history of the American avant-garde, offering detailed analysis of work by filmmakers such as Paul Strand, Charles Sheeler, Ralph Steiner, Mary Ellen Bute, Jay Leyda, Douglas Crockwell, Robert Florey, Theodore Huff, James Sibley Watson Jr., Melville Webber, Man Ray and Dudley Murphy. The work was well-received by scholars, but its impact was perhaps blunted by the fact that the vast majority of the films it discussed were nearly impossible to find.

This is where Unseen Cinema comes in. Posner's program seeks to make available many of the films which are analyzed in *Lovers of Cinema* as well as dozens of others which support the existence of indigenous avant-garde practice in the U.S. even in cinema's earliest days. These include such relatively well-known films as Fernand Leger and Dudley Murphy's *Ballet Mecanique* (1924), Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936), Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich's *The Life and Death of 9413 - A Hollywood Extra* (1927), Alla Nazimova's *Salome* (1922), James Sibley Watson's *Lot in Sodom* (1933), Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921), as well as abstract animations by Oskar Fischinger and Mary Ellen Bute.

"The beauty of *Lovers of Cinema*," says Posner, "is that it gives the most open picture of what was out there - things that have never been recounted in detail. Horak's book not only describes them film-by-film, but he went and looked for them and found them and started to amass them as a group. I call Unseen Cinema 'the movie of the book.'"

Lovers of Cinema

The editor of *Lovers of Cinema* now works out of a tiny office on a subterranean floor of the Hollywood Entertainment Museum, just down the street from Mann's Chinese Theater. The idea of a museum seems vaguely out of place in Hollywood, a town which unashamedly strives to live in a perpetual present of opening weekend grosses and fetishized youth, where historical artifacts are more likely to appear on the walls of cheesy tourist restaurants than in the sanctified space of a museum. A German native who speaks English without a trace of an accent, Horak recounts his decision to leave his job at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York to come to Los Angeles and create an archive for Universal Studios. Two-and-a-half years later, he explains still with a hint of bitterness, the studio abruptly pulled the plug on the

project and Horak involuntarily concluded what he describes as his "first and last experience with the world of big money Hollywood."

Talking about the relation between Hollywood and the avant-garde in early cinema, Horak might as well be describing his own uneasy role as a serious film scholar directing a museum where the most popular display is a set from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, "Within the industry there are always pockets and moments or points of resistance where experimentation is allowed. It doesn't usually last very long, but they're always there."

The blurring of boundaries between avant-garde and early industrial cinema constitutes one of the most provocative aspects of both Horak's book and the Unseen Cinema project. Rather than perpetuate the radical distinction between avant-garde and industrial cinema (which inevitably works to the detriment of the avant-garde), these projects point to moments of convergence between the two. In Unseen Cinema, this is exemplified by the work of figures such as Robert Florey who moved fluidly between experimental and industrial practice, Busby Berkeley whose use of montage and formal experimentation defied all Hollywood conventions of their time, and Slavko Vorkapich, who built a career on creating visually striking experimental sequences within otherwise conventional Hollywood narratives (the unacknowledged predecessor to today's title sequence auteurs).

The thing to remember, Horak says, is that "the avant-garde as it has always been defined – can only be defined – in contradiction to mainstream cinema. In early cinema there is no industry and no codified film language. There are only individual producers, experimenters who very often are shooting the film themselves. They're developing it, they're doing everything. The practice is virtually the same as that of avant-garde cinema." Although his book in some sense provided the theoretical basis for Unseen Cinema, Horak has provided minimal input regarding Posner's programming decisions. "He likes to say this is the 'movie of the book.' Who knows? Maybe it'll sell a few more copies."

A Lover of Cinema

Even within a field that's known for iconoclasm and eccentricity, Bruce Posner is sometimes characterized as something of a loose cannon, an enthusiastic and quixotic independent whose diverse interests make him best known for "digressions" into the farthest reaches of film history. But he is also a tenacious programmer and advocate for avant-garde cinema who has dedicated the last three years of his life to creating a program which he hopes will make a significant contribution to film historiography.

"Nobody has done this before," Posner says with obvious excitement, "these films have never been grouped this way. A lot of them were seen only by a few people. Even the Hollywood films came and went after a two-week run. They weren't around the way they are today. It wasn't until television that films resurfaced and could be seen over and over. So I'm sort of doing that for these films – they'll be available again and they'll get out in various ways and become part of the cultural fabric."

The idea for a program of films that almost nobody has seen had been percolating in Posner's brain since at least the 1970s when he was a film student at the Art Institute of Chicago. "I went there because people told me there was a guy teaching there named Stan Brakhage," Posner recalls. "Brakhage taught a great course on

avant-garde film history and I discovered there was this 'other cinema' underneath all the cinemas that everyone knows about."

Inspired by Brakhage, Posner began experimenting with filmmaking and has since created over 50 films. Nowadays, he lives across the street from J.D. Salinger (who, he notes, has a large film collection) in New Hampshire and rarely watches anything produced in the film industry after 1941, finding contemporary Hollywood films "anemic" compared with the richness and complexity of early cinema. Although he confesses to hiding in the past at times, Posner is no recluse. He has curated film programs all over New England (including a five-year stint at the Harvard Film Archive) as well as in his native Florida, where he helped found Alliance Cinema, and he regularly hosts public film screenings from his personal collection.

For Unseen Cinema, Posner enlisted the support of Anthology Film Archive, which has served as the gravitational center of New York's avant-garde film scene since 1970. This, in spite of the fact, he says, that "a lot of people regard Anthology as a kind of ugly cousin of the film world...So the project had two strikes against it right from the beginning: one was Anthology and the other was Bruce Posner."

Following a successful "prototype" program in Hanover, New Hampshire in 1999, which included lectures by several of the contributors to *Lovers of Cinema*, Posner began to feel more hopeful about the program. The same year, Brian Taves, who also contributed an essay to Horak's book, assembled a series of rarely seen films from the 1920s for the Pordenone Silent Film Festival. Although the experimental programs were disappointingly under-attended, Posner remained convinced of the importance of the project. And indeed, their efforts were rewarded when, as a direct result of Taves' Pordenone program, one of Robert Florey's early avant-garde films which had been held at a film archive in Moscow for over 70 years was rediscovered. The recently repatriated (and stunningly beautiful) short, *Skyscraper Symphony* (1929), will screen with Florey's other two remaining avant-garde films, *The Love of Zero* (1928) and *The Life and Death of 9413 - A Hollywood Extra* (1928) for the first time at Unseen Cinema.

In Praise of Amateur

But perhaps the most remarkable thing about Unseen Cinema is its inclusion of numerous amateur films and filmmakers whose work has been left out of both mainstream film histories as well as histories of the avant-garde. In Unseen Cinema, works by relative unknowns like Theodore Huff (who, according to legend, was instrumental in reopening the Library of Congress' paper print collection) and home movie maker Elizabeth Whitman Wright are positioned on an equal footing with classics of avant-garde cinema like James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber's *Lot in Sodom* (1933) and Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray's *Anémic Cinéma* (1925).

During this period, Posner argues, the distinction between avant-garde and amateur was less clear. "Art films" and "amateur movies" often shared exhibition venues and distribution networks. And in the 1920s, a group called the Amateur Cinema League began publishing a high-quality glossy monthly magazine, which included information about avant-garde cinema. But perhaps most importantly, these two groups often shared the same audiences and therefore experienced a certain degree of formal and thematic cross-pollination. "There was an amazing distribution network among amateur film clubs," says Posner, "and these were open to avant-garde filmmakers as well. So you'd have a lot of travelogues and birthdays, but also *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Ralph Steiner's *H2O*."

In structuring the programs for Unseen Cinema, Posner recaptures some of this spirit of boundary-crossing, often combining works based around thematic or stylistic concerns without regard for chronology or "type." Some programs are organized around abstract ideas such as "Melodies and Montages" or "Fantastic Myths and Fairytales," while others focus on concrete subjects such as The Depression or images of New York city. Unseen Cinema also highlights the often uncanny resemblance between "primitive" cinema and the North American Structural film movement which flourished briefly in the late 1960s and early 70s. Archie Stewart's narration of a series of camera and microphone tests in Reel 66, for example, eerily prefigures Morgan Fisher's deadpan exegesis of film processes in *Cue Rolls* and *Picture and Sound Rushes*. Likewise, Billy Bitzer's symmetrical composition and stroboscopic motion through a subway tunnel in *Interior NY Subway, 14th St. to 42nd St.* (1905) is echoed formally by Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*. Posner notes several other future-anterior examples of structural film in Unseen Cinema, including Henwar Rodakiewicz's *Portrait of a Young Man* (1925-31) and Bitzer's *Panorama of Machine Co. Aisle Westinghouse Works* (1904). Of the latter, Posner remarks, "This was 60 years before Wavelength and it's practically the same film!"

While conventional narratives of film history tend to naturalize the evolution of Classical Hollywood Cinema toward increasingly realistic (and formulaic) narratives, Unseen Cinema charts a distinctly different course. In a sense, what Posner does is dig deep into the subconscious of the silent era, uncovering works which – whether forgotten or repressed – stray from history's well-worn paths. Curating such a program, Posner avers, "is more art than science," hastening to add that his seemingly chaotic juxtapositions are in fact crucial to the logic of the overall program. "I wanted to have Busby Berkeley and Hollywood musicals or Slavko Vorkapich's montage sequences right up against a home moviemaker like Archie Stewart or Elizabeth Whitman Wright. This way you see that they're obviously different but at the same time they're grasping at the same straws: how to use this camera and this form to get something visual and exciting across."

Preservation

Perhaps equally important as the programming is the preservation component of Unseen Cinema. In a remarkable gesture of support, New York's Cineric Laboratories agreed to do all necessary restoration for Unseen Cinema free of charge. By the time Unseen Cinema begins its four-year world tour in July 2001, Cineric will have created new negatives and exhibition prints for over one-third of the 145 film program – approximately 60 films, some of which had to be pieced together from multiple surviving prints to yield the best quality preservation negative. On the importance of Cineric's contribution, Posner is unequivocal, "This program couldn't have happened without their incredible, unprecedented act of generosity. There's no way to thank them."

In spite of the best intentions of archivists, the preservation of avant-garde films is often an extraordinarily difficult undertaking. Horak notes, "Right now if you look at who's doing most of the film preservation funding – the Martin Scorseses or the David Packards of the world – it's people who are really focused on the Hollywood cinema. The other problem is that filmmakers, especially avant-garde filmmakers, are notorious for continuously reworking their work, so you have films that are in 5, 6, 7 different versions. What is the original object? Who knows?"

But Posner points to a more hopeful connection between avant-garde practice and concern with preservation, "Many of what we now consider the established preservation institutions [e.g., MoMA, Anthology Film Archive, George Eastman House] were actually the product of individuals who were obsessed with film and loved it so much that they were willing to work to save it. This concept seems brand new to us, but if you look back, the people who made these avant-garde films were the same ones who instituted the archives and preservation. The interrelationship between film preservation and independent filmmaking pre-1941 is hand in glove."

For Horak, part of the importance of Unseen Cinema is the promise it holds to reopen discussion of these films and the history to which they attest, "I think it's important that any scholar's work be checked by other scholars. And that's only possible if the films are available. Somebody else might write a book that attacks my work, and that's fine, but they can only do that if they can see the films." Toward this end, whenever possible, screenings of Unseen Cinema will be accompanied by panels, lectures or presentations by the various contributors to Lovers of Cinema or Unseen Cinema's advisory board which includes many of the most highly regarded scholars of avant-garde and early cinema. But for Posner, it will be enough if the films get seen. "I just hope the title of the project defeats itself," he says, "that it doesn't fulfill its destiny." •